ブレイブルー4 コンティニュアムシフト〈下〉

原案・監修：森利道
（アークシステムワークス）
著：駒尾真子

ドラゴンブック

ドラゴンブック
ふ-1
3-4

BLAZBLUE—ブレイブルー—4
コンティニュアムシフト〈下〉

原案・監修：森利道
著：駒尾真子

富士見書房

“Major Kisaragi, prepare yourself!”
The Sealed Armament: Izayoi releases its wings of light.

“Noel, is that you?”
The girl landed gracefully and silently.
“Now, Murakumo, awaken! Hyahahaha!”

"Is it good?" Ragna's lips naturally curved into a smile.

BLAZBLUE - Blazblue 4

Continuum Shift (Part 2)

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Chapter 1: Code number - Sector Seven

He was used to the darkness.

To the silence and loneliness. To the oppression and restraints.

To the suffocating, swirling seithr, and to the Boundary, which was like a raging flame that never scorched. He was so used to it that it lost its luster.

How long had he been immersed? Even before he lost his heart and ceased being human, they were always terribly close. Right by his side, cold and empty, in his hollow self.

It's the same now.

A familiar sensation that he once felt was cold. Yet now, it's a distant sensation he had completely forgotten. Carrying these feelings with him, he- Hakumen -was trapped in the Edge of the Boundary.

The surroundings were so dark it was as if the darkness had been solidified. The flaming color of the Boundary flickered below like molten lava, but it was just a faint afterglow.

This place was darkness as far as the eye could see. But there was no despair. It was just darkness. For Hakumen, it was nothing more than lukewarm water.

The one who confined Hakumen to this annoying lukewarm water was a single scientist. Her name was Kokonoe.

She was not an unfamiliar face. Rather, she was a being at the end of a deep connection. Her sharp gaze was inherited from her mother. Her short stature was inherited from her father. Her stubbornness was from her mother. Her single-mindedness was from her father.

She was a human-beastkin hybrid with pink hair and small beastkin ears.

The body she had captured had no pain, but it was just endlessly empty. There was no way to tell how much time had passed.

Hakumen's consciousness wandered in the darkness. He clenched his fist to confirm that his body still existed here.

Hakumen's appearance was clearly different from that of a human. His sturdy body was covered in black and white attire, and ominous red sun-like objects were embedded in it. There were no eyes on his face. Not just eyes, but no nose or mouth either. The appearance of a plain white mask covering his face was his current "face."

On his back was a long sword named Interfectum Malus: Ookami. If he were to draw it, he could easily sever these restraints. It was a sword with immense power, but Hakumen himself did not have enough power to fully wield it.

The body here was not Hakumen's original one. This was, so to speak, a fragment, a phantom, that someone else had cut out by recognizing the existence of "Hakumen."

So where was his original body? It was still drifting in the place where he had been sealed for a long time- the "Boundary."

"How pathetic, Mr. Hero."

Suddenly, a voice echoed in the darkness. It was high and thin, but contained a mockery not fitting for a young girl. Hakumen turned his attention to it. The voice's owner was there.

It was a girl with long golden hair tied in two pigtails, wearing a black dress. She was accompanied by two familiars: a black cat-faced parasol and a small, winged red creature. Her crimson eyes looked down at him silently. She was clearly visible in the dark, as if wrapped in a faint phosphorescent glow.

Hakumen stared at the girl in the black dress with his eyeless mask and replied emotionlessly.

"...Harlequin."

In other words, Rachel Alucard. A vampire who had lived for a period of time unimaginable from her youthful appearance. And the one who gave Hakumen his inhuman form.

"You escape from one cage, only to be immediately brought back and put into an even stronger one... It's fitting for a stupid, idiotic dog. Shall I give you a collar as a present?"

Looking down on Hakumen from a slightly higher position, Rachel teased him, a sarcastic smile on her innocent face.

It was a foolish provocation. Hakumen slightly moved his neck as if to look away, and his mouthless face fell silent. He had no intention of entertaining her nonsense.

"Still such a boring man." Despite her words, Rachel spoke in an unchanging, unamused tone. Above her, the black cat familiar, who had turned into a parasol, let out a knowing laugh.

"But that quiet side of yours is so cool and *wonderful*."

"Ehh, princess, your taste is awful~. A man should be kind, y'know!" The noisy voice that followed belonged to the other familiar, the one with the red body. It flapped its small wings and

shrieked in a high-pitched voice, but its words only slightly irritated Hakumen's nerves and vanished into nothingness without any emotional response.

As Hakumen remained silent without raising his face, Rachel ran her fingers through her long hair and leisurely looked up at the darkness. The endless darkness. But it was only temporary.

"Kokonoe has prepared quite a magnificent cage. It directly siphons energy from the Cauldron, so it operates semi-permanently, and even if you try to destroy it by force, any damage is instantly repaired. The release code is over five hundred digits long, and the code itself is rewritten every few seconds..."

This cage was originally prepared by Kokonoe to trap a "different beast." But it didn't serve that purpose in time and was being used to capture an oni instead of a beast.

Narrating as if she were reciting a passage from a story, Rachel's gaze slid back to Hakumen. She narrowed her blood-red eyes just a little, as if appraising him.

"Even if you had your original power, there's no guarantee you could break this cage. And with your current state, it's certainly impossible."

"Do you understand?" Rachel's gaze seemed to ask without words.

No, it wasn't a question. Hakumen denied it in his mind. No matter how he answered, she would only sneer and play with trivial words. It was no longer a question.

"Did you come here to mock me?" Hakumen's voice was low as he looked up at the girl floating in the darkness.

Looking down at him, Rachel's lips curled into a mocking smile.

"Don't flatter yourself. Do you think I would come all this way for something so trivial? I'd have a much more meaningful time drinking tea with Valkenhayn."

Hakumen felt a faceless disgust at her arrogant tone. He had long associated with the vampire girl, and whether or not he wanted to be involved, their connection was deep. He was used to her infuriating way of speaking, but familiarity didn't always lead to fondness or indifference.

As if sensing Hakumen's frowning expression, Rachel cheerfully spun the bat-like umbrella her familiar had transformed into.

"I'll tell you one thing."

As she spoke, Rachel gracefully closed her parasol. Carrying the docile, folded familiar like a cane, the amusement in her eyes and lips vanished. She stared sharply and intently at the white oni.

"Terumi has been resurrected."

"What?" Hakumen couldn't help but question the girl's quiet statement. His voice was clouded with suspicion and unease. He didn't know how long he had been inside this annoying cage. But it couldn't have been long.

What had happened after he ran out of power beneath the 13th Hierarchical City of Kagutsuchi and was retrieved by Kokonoe's cyborg?

On that night at the end of the year 2199, Hakumen knew of two strange anomalies.

One was the phenomenon intervention by Kokonoe, the scientist who managed this cage and stabilized Hakumen's existence in the present world. When he was about to slaughter a man with a red coat and white hair, Ragna the Bloodedge, in the underground of Kagutsuchi, he was interrupted. Kokonoe forcefully intervened, attempting to neutralize Hakumen by force.

But in the end, Hakumen had removed her intervention.

The other anomaly… was the girl.

In the middle of their sword fight, a girl fell into the area.

A girl who shouldn't have been there.

"The golden-haired soldier girl..."

"They call her Noel Vermillion, it seems." Rachel added to Hakumen's low monologue.

Her name didn't matter. Hakumen looked up knowingly at the vampire floating in the darkness.

"Is that soldier the cause?"

A single foreign element could bring about a major change. An existence that shouldn't be there could cause events that shouldn't happen.

Rachel shook her head once, but then tilted it as if in thought.

"I can't say it's not the cause. Her existence was undoubtedly essential for Terumi's resurrection." As she spoke, Rachel took a graceful step forward. She descended through the empty, desolate darkness as if she were walking down stairs and stopped in front of Hakumen.

"That child inherited the Azure. She became the Eye of the World. And with that Eye, she recognized that man... Terumi."

"The inheritor of the Azure?" Hakumen's voice became even heavier and clouded. A sensation similar to fury coursed through his restrained, immobile body. He was ashamed of his own powerlessness. It was frustrating that he had been so easily outmaneuvered when a major turning point was so close.

Noticing Hakumen's frustration with himself, Rachel frowned and continued.

"It was Takamagahara's doing that liberated Terumi, who was sealed in the Boundary with you. With this, it seems they are finally going to make their move in earnest. They'll use Terumi to grasp all events and control the world's events according to their own agenda."

They grasp all possibilities, then choose and leave behind only the most rational outline that is closest to their ideal vision.

How many people would ever think that a person’s actions, someone's intentions, something so small, are being selected by someone? How many people would understand that this is the truth? If such a thought were to become widespread, they would simply discard that event and choose a different one.

In this way, Takamagahara controls the world. Just as the past hundred years have repeated, the next hundred years’ fate will also be nothing more than a fantasy following a script. People will continue to dance comically as desired, unaware of their own conditions.

And they won't know what conclusion awaits them.

"Were you watching again?" Hakumen clenched his already-clenched fist even tighter and asked in a deep voice. "You knew everything, yet you just watched it all again!?"

The thunderous voice was less of a shout and more of a roar. The air vibrated dully, creating the illusion of non-existent wind pressure.

The small familiar flying beside Rachel let out a faint shriek and hid behind its owner. The parasol, now a staff in the girl's hand, trembled with fear. But the vampire girl, staring back at the white mask, showed no sign of shrinking or displeasure. She answered with cold simplicity.

"Yes, I did."

"You...!"

"So what?" Rachel coldly dismissed Hakumen's fury. A strange emotion lurked in her gaze. "I am a bystander. In every era, I cannot get involved in the history of humanity." This was almost a sort of catchphrase between Rachel and Hakumen.

Hakumen had directed this same fury at Rachel countless times, and each time, Rachel had responded with that same cold gaze and merciless words.

Hakumen deeply understood why Rachel merely watched the world's progression like an audience member at a play. Even so, his anger swelled. His own hands had been unable to change anything.

Rachel blinked once, her long eyelashes fluttering. With her crimson eyes, she asked Hakumen, "But what about you, Mr. Hero?"

"What do you mean?"

"You are like me. But you are not the same as me."

It was a riddle. Rachel smiled, a smile that seemed almost maternal and uncharacteristic of a young girl.

"Mr. Hero, become my servant. In return, I'll let you out of here."

The restraints were sealed with a complicated lock that only Kokonoe, its creator, should've been able to undo. Rachel spoke as if it were a trivial matter. It might have been possible for this vampire, but her arrogant tone was more irritating than anything else.

"I refuse. I'd rather be chained to this place for a thousand years than stoop to becoming your servant."

"Oh, an immediate reply?" Her voice was still teasing, devoid of disappointment or praise. Hakumen frowned, though it didn't show on the white mask.

"However, leaving that man unchecked is also infuriating."

After a moment's pause, Hakumen's next words deepened Rachel's satisfied smile. Her crimson eyes narrowed.

"You haven't made any progress on that front since the old days. Fine, I'll make a special exception and forgive you for it."

The small girl's hand reached out into the empty air. A rose-colored magic circle appeared on her white fingertips, and then a sound like thin glass shattering rang out.

It was an anticlimax. As if playfully destroying a fragile piece of craftsmanship, Rachel undid Kokonoe's restraints.

Hakumen, now free, brought his hands before him to confirm. He made a fist and opened it. There was no lasting effect from the confinement. It was a remarkable feat, much to his annoyance.

"I have one question." Hakumen's voice was heavy. Rachel answered as she opened her familiar-umbrella again.

"What is it?"

"Why did you help the Dark One? To the point of releasing the Tsukuyomi Unit?"

The Tsukuyomi Unit. It was one of Rachel's trump cards, and a significantly important one at that.

Whether it was because he pointed out its release, or the question itself, Rachel blinked her eyes a few times, as if amused.

Hakumen continued without waiting.

"He cannot defeat Terumi."

That was an unshakeable fact. A fact as self-evident as the laws of the world for both Hakumen and Rachel.

"I know that," was her simple reply.

Rachel opened the black cat-faced umbrella and held it on her small shoulder. The red familiar peeked out from behind her, still wary of Hakumen.

A cool sound, like glass scattering on the floor, rained down. It was the sound of the binding array collapsing. In the midst of it, Rachel once again made her fingers dance in the void. This time, a large magic circle appeared at her feet. It was a teleportation spell.

"I'll give you a little time, Mr. Hero." The magic circle enveloped Rachel in a rose-colored light. The light surrounded her and made her elegant smile shine even more. Her voice echoed like words in a dream. "So think about it for a little while. Why do I continue to watch him?"

Him- Ragna the Bloodedge.

Taking her two familiars and the lingering echo of her voice with her, Rachel vanished from the spot.

Left behind, Hakumen remained alone in the Edge of the Boundary.

"Harlequin."

His muttered words, spit out in disgust, also held a hint of exasperation. He slowly reached for the greatsword on his back.

"What a fool..."

With those words, he lowered his stance and drew his sword. In one swift motion, he swung the blade downward, splitting the darkness.

The darkness tore without a sound. Through the diagonal tear, a sterile room with gray metal walls came into view- a room in the laboratory managed by Kokonoe.

Hakumen returned the sword, which had sliced through the darkness and the sealed space, to his back, and he took a big step with his clawed feet. With that one step, the surrounding scenery changed completely. The darkness fell away, and in its place was the interior of the gray room he had just seen through the rift.

The only obstacle had been the lock. Once that lock was removed, escaping the Edge of the Boundary wasn't a difficult task.

However, Rachel could have transported him out of that space along with herself. She didn't do so because of the "time" she was giving him.

The distance from here to Kagutsuchi wasn't exactly close. The time it took for Hakumen to arrive was the time limit Rachel had set.

"Foolish." Hakumen spoke, knowing his words wouldn't reach the girl who had already disappeared.

Why? he had asked. *Think,* Rachel had replied. He didn't need to think.

She was hoping. Hoping that man, or someone drawn to him, would change such a trivial thing as fate or the world. And that it would be done by the hands of a "human" who lived in this world and deserved to live in it.

It was very similar to the ideal Rachel's father had spoken of. Was she aware of it? Regardless.

"That time will not be long."

The announcement of the binding array's collapse and the escape of the subject had been ringing throughout the area, a constant, annoying sound. Red lights flashed frantically, indicating an emergency.

Kokonoe must have already known of Hakumen's escape. She would take action soon. It would be easy to cut down armed soldiers, but it would be troublesome if she brought out complicated devices.

There was only one door to the room. For now, he would start the countdown by getting out of here. And when his feet touched the soil of Kagutsuchi again...

"I will sever fate in my own way."

Listening to the annoying alarm, Hakumen stopped for a moment in front of the door. He stepped forward, twisted his body, and in the next instant, his kick shattered the thick metal door.

January 3, 2200 - 15:41

A single restaurant in the lower city of the 13th Hierarchical City of Kagutsuchi, known as Orient Town, had completely lost the simple, sluggish everyday scenery that had been there just a few minutes ago. A round table was flipped over, and the bottles of seasoning that had been on it were shattered and scattered on the floor. The few customers who had been there all shrieked and ran out of the restaurant, and the young butterfly waitstaff had lost their nerve and were crouched on the floor. The owner remained hidden in the kitchen, not even showing his face.

It was a small, old, and greasy restaurant. And inside that restaurant...

"UOOOAAAAAAGH!"

A man's roar and the clash of metal rang out, indicating a fierce battle was underway.

“URAAAAH!”

Swinging a broadsword from above in a straight, downward strike was a man with white hair and a striking red jacket, Ragna the Bloodedge. The young girl who had just been sharing a meal with him- Luna, Sena, Trinity, or whatever name she had given herself -was now unconscious behind a fallen table.

The one who blocked Ragna's attack with a device on her arm was a girl who had suddenly burst into the restaurant. She had long golden hair tied in a braid down her back, and beautiful pale skin.

But her appearance was strange. Her slender body was encased in a tight-fitting bodysuit, and formidable blade-like devices were attached to her arms and legs. A large headgear covered her eyes, and a red light in its center, perhaps serving as a replacement for her eyes, was fixed on the man in front of her, on Ragna.

"Impact invalid." The girl's lips moved just enough to murmur in a cold, mechanical voice. "Attack."

In response to her voice, the eight thin, long parts floating behind the girl all aimed at Ragna. Each of them was shaped like a sword blade drawn from a hilt, and their dull sheen hinted at their sharp edges.

"Fire."

"Tch!"

Obediently following the emotionless voice, the eight swords flew straight at Ragna. Ragna was forced to pull his sword back. As he leaped back, he parried the incoming blades. A rough clatter of metal echoed, and sparks flew.

Ragna stopped the final incoming blade, which was aimed directly at his head, with the flat of his beloved sword, creating an earsplitting, metallic shriek.

"Damn it!"

Ragna deflected the attack, swinging his sword violently and slamming it onto the floor, then readied himself once more.

"No abnormalities. Continuing combat." The girl's lips spoke. At that voice, that tone, and those words, Ragna felt a distinct chill run down his spine.

"What are you?" He shouted furiously at the girl in front of him.

It had been only a few seconds since the girl with the headgear had appeared in the restaurant. Until then, it had just been an ordinary, slightly gloomy diner, and then she suddenly teleported in.

Immediately after, she attacked him without warning, leading to the current situation. Every time this girl of unknown origin and purpose moved, every time she spoke, Ragna felt a chill run down his spine.

He had never seen this girl before. He didn't know her. But her silhouette was so similar to another girl he had just seen a few days ago.

Nu-13. The "Boundary Interface Prime Field Device" who called herself "Nu" and had the number "13" on her chest.

No, it wasn’t just similar. Everything was exactly the same: the braided hairstyle, the hair that was long enough to drag on the ground, the design of her clothes, and even the small details of the parts she wore. The only differences were that Nu had silver hair while the girl in front of him had golden hair, and the color of the bodysuit she was wearing.

"Nu... is that you?"

No. Even as he asked the question, Ragna strongly denied it internally.

When Nu spoke to Ragna, she did so in a strangely familiar and clingy tone. But this blonde girl didn't change her mechanical demeanor even when she saw Ragna.

Above all, Nu had fallen into the Cauldron after her fight with Ragna. She had thrown herself into the Cauldron with Ragna, but only Ragna had been pulled out.

There was no way something that had fallen into the Cauldron could be here. So this wasn't Nu or anything like that. It was something simpler.

"Another Prime Field..."

By speaking the words aloud, his hot-headed mind, which tended to focus only on combat, began to think.

"Eleven..."

He looked closely and saw a number carved on the chest of the girl with the same appearance as Nu. It was "11." The number carved on Nu was 13. She was a different individual after all.

And... she was undoubtedly a Prime Field.

"Tch, thirteen, twelve, and now eleven! Isn't that just great?" Ragna harshly spat out.

The events he had almost forgotten during the meal earlier were now being recalled one after another.

The thirteenth girl wanted to fall into the Cauldron with Ragna, but in reality, she had fallen alone, leaving a terribly sad, faint voice in the back of Ragna's mind.

The twelfth girl looked too much like Ragna's sister. Ragna had superimposed a faint illusion of his sister onto her image. But she also wasn't a human, and she had a Prime Field number on her chest.

It wasn't just the thirteenth and twelfth girls. Ragna had also found these numbers on the chests of countless other motionless girls he had come across and destroyed while traveling between the various NOL branches.

The Boundary Interface Prime Field Devices, dolls made based on Ragna's sister, Saya.

"This is making me sick..." Ragna's words, filled with a welling sense of revulsion and indignation, came with an unwavering and undisturbed will to fight.

When the girl lightly raised her slender hand, the eight blades that had fallen to the floor returned to her. They lined up behind her like wings. Dangerous wings. They reminded him of Nu, who shouldn't have been here.

"Attack." With a calm declaration, the girl lowered her body and slid forward, charging straight ahead on her sharp feet. As she charged, she swung both arms down, and following their trajectory, the wings on her back transformed into a series of eight slashes that assaulted Ragna from above.

It was a large attack. The speed at which it sliced through the air was fast, but contrary to its lightness, the slashes were heavy. Ragna instinctively used his greatsword as a shield, but was brought to his knees by the weight of the consecutive attacks.

The red light of the headgear stared at Ragna, who was enduring the impact. With a cold expression on her pursed lips, the girl continued by raising her slender arms.

A blade wrapped in black phosphorescence was called into existence. The black swords that split the space mercilessly pierced their target from below, one after another, like execution tools.

Ragna was slow to react, his eyes involuntarily drawn to the large eyes of the headgear . A sword caught his foot as he tried to back away, and a black blade sliced the side of his knee before he could pull it back.

"Ugh!"

The attack didn't end there. This time, from the front, the girl's fingertips, drawn like a bowstring, pointed at Ragna. Following their designated target, the eight blades on her back fired one after another.

"Don't underestimate me!"

Although he was off balance, he managed to pull his greatsword closer, barely blocking the successive strikes that tried to pierce through his sword. The moment the impact stopped, he pulled his sword back and used the recoil to propel himself forward, thrusting his fist at the girl.

The fist that tore through the air was instantly shrouded in darkness, and it struck his attacker directly. Unable to guard in time, the girl with the headgear took a direct hit and was sent flying backward.

There was ample opportunity for a follow-up attack. Ragna intended to do so.

But he couldn't move.

The mechanical movements and expressions. Despite its clearly non-human form, the belly he struck with brute force had the elasticity and warmth of a living creature. It felt like the touch of a living human being.

His breath caught in his throat, and Ragna grit his teeth as he forced it out.

His opponent was trying to kill him. The strike she landed had indeed sliced through his flesh. Although the wound itself was already closing thanks to the power of his Grimoire, the Azure Grimoire, the weight of his blood-soaked clothes still remained.

He had no reason to hold back. This wasn't an opponent who required caution. He didn't know this mechanical girl in the first place. There was no compassion for him to feel. He understood this. But for some reason, a hesitation he could clearly recognize had been born within Ragna's heart.

(*What the hell... damn it!*)

As Ragna struggled to make up his mind, the girl rose from her awkwardly fallen position, placing her hands on the floor and slowly getting to her feet.

After being punched in the stomach with that much force, an ordinary person wouldn't have been able to catch their breath so quickly. But the girl stood up without a single cough and stared at Ragna through her headgear as if nothing had happened.

The illusion of Nu overlapped with her face.

Nu was a Prime Field. An artificial being made with Ragna's sister as material, meant for contact with the dangerous Boundary, and something that should be destroyed.

But... Noel was also a Prime Field with a number on her chest. She talked, cried, was confused, was shy, and sometimes laughed. At first glance, or even after spending a long time with her, she seemed like a perfectly ordinary girl.

Had Nu been thinking something at that moment? A few days ago, when she fell into the Cauldron alone deep underground in Kagutsuchi, looking up at Ragna's back as he was saved by Noel, what had she...

(*Stop it, stop it! Now's not the time to be thinking about that!*)

Ragna stuck his fingers in his dusty white hair and shook his head, blocking the swirling thoughts.

He gripped his sword again, took a stance, and glared at the girl in front of him. The girl with the number eleven. The Prime Field girl. An existence that must be destroyed. That was all he needed to think about.

The standing girl with the number eleven stared at Ragna through her headgear. With a single word, she shattered his will to fight into pieces.

"Ra... gna."

A thin voice called his name. It was the same voice as Nu's. And that was the moment his ears picked it up.

"Wh-What?!?"

Suddenly, a chill ran down Ragna's spine, and his right arm felt heavy as if it were sinking. He looked down in a panic to find his entire arm enveloped in a faint darkness. It stiffened and spasmed, and he couldn't control it. It was lashing out on its own.

"Not now...!" Ragna immediately thrust his sword into the floor and used his left hand to hold down his struggling right arm.

Unlike his left hand, which he could control, Ragna's right arm was not his own. It was a grimoire that had been given the form and function of an arm. The Azure Grimoire... If this dangerous thing, which absorbs the lives of people around it, were to run wild in this cramped town, there's no telling what kind of damage it would cause.

Groaning, Ragna raised his head. The Grimoire was a problem, but he was also in the middle of a battle with that girl. He didn't think she'd let him go just because his arm was malfunctioning.

But when he looked up, something even stranger was happening to the girl.

"Ah... ah, ah... ugh, ah..."

Instead of attacking or even taking a stance, the girl was looking up at the ceiling and groaning awkwardly, like a broken machine. The red light in the center of her ominous headgear was flickering violently.

Her mouth opened limply, trembling, and she seemed to be muttering something between her groans.

"R-gna... Rag-na... ah, ah, ugh... abnormality, abnormality, abnormality, unable to cope... unable... Ragna, I wanted to see you, I've been waiting for you this whole time."

As if intoxicated with ecstasy, the Prime Field girl's tone changed. The flickering of her headgear slowed, and she shook her long golden braid and slowly turned to face Ragna. Her stubborn, expressionless lips curved into an innocent smile.

"Haha, it's you, Ragna. It's so mean of you to leave Nu behind."

A chill. It wasn't something as mild as that. It felt as if a warm hand had stroked the back of his neck.

She was number eleven with golden hair and a black bodysuit. But the words that came from her mouth were unmistakably Nu's.

"You! Seriously, what the hell are you?! You're not Nu, are you!?" Ragna barked, forcibly clenching his right hand and enduring the rising pressure. He grabbed his sword as if pulling it out.

In that short time, the eleventh girl's entire body trembled with another abnormality. Her head snapped backward, and she grabbed her head with both hands as if she had a headache.

"Ah, ah... abnormal, abnormal, abnormal, abnormal. Error in memory region. Unable... unable to cope. It hurts... it hurts, it's cold, help me... no, no! AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

In a state of confusion, the girl suddenly shrieked. At the same time, the space around Ragna warped, and a black, murky rift appeared, from which black blades emerged. They were similar to the one that had just cut Ragna's leg, but they were thinner, lighter, and sharper.

"Oh shit!"

Still unable to comprehend the situation, Ragna swung his sword widely.

The black swords summoned by the girl's scream tore through space one after another and flew at Ragna. If he did nothing, he'd be skewered. Ragna knocked down the incoming objects indiscriminately, scattering a shower of sparks.

His right arm ached heavily. He was being dragged down by the sensation of being swallowed up. The darkness swelled, and within Ragna, the girl changed into a target.

"Ah, ah, AAAAAAAAH!" The eleventh girl was still screaming. Another wave was coming.

"UOOOOOOOAAAH!" Ragna roared, his body driven by impulse. Darkness traveled from his raised right arm to his greatsword.

They were about to clash. But just then, a rough shattering sound and a vibration shook the area, and then a flash of electricity from somewhere hit the girl.

As violent discharges dispersed, an electromagnetic cable wrapped around the girl and quickly pulled her away. At the other end of the cable was a red-skinned giant who had forcefully entered the cramped entrance, destroying it.

Ragna remembered the man. He directed his fighting spirit from the numbered girl to the giant, glaring even harder.

"You... the Red Devil of Sector Seven."

He was a cyborg soldier belonging to Sector Seven, an organization that was in conflict with the Novus Orbis Librarium. His official name was TRI-0009 Tager. He was a red-skinned man with superhuman strength and a giant frame due to having oni genes incorporated into him, and his common name was "Red Devil."

He had met him for only a short time before, but the entire event was deeply etched in his mind. He was the man who had intervened to protect Ragna when he confronted Terumi in front of the Cauldron in Kagutsuchi.

"Been a few days, hasn't it, Grim Reaper."

Speaking in a low, calm voice, the Red Devil, Tager, hoisted the girl, who had lost consciousness from the electricity, onto his burly shoulder.

2

When the swirling dust settled, the restaurant's devastated state was there in all its serene reality.

Not a single table stood upright, and the various seasoning bottles on them had fallen to the floor, spilling their contents. There were several shallow slash marks on the floor and walls, and some were deeply carved in.

The dull and ordinary atmosphere from when he had entered was nowhere to be found. But that was of no concern to Ragna. The situation in front of him was much more serious.

Ragna lifted the tip of the sword he was carrying and gripped the hilt with both hands. His right arm, which had been on the verge of losing control, had calmed down sometime during the incident.

"Looks like I should be asking you for answers." Ragna said, his brows furrowed in a harsh glare and his voice filled with explicit hostility.

But Tager only glanced at Ragna and didn't bother with him further. He put a hand to his ear and spoke into his comms.

"Collection complete. Requesting transfer." As soon as he said that, the girl's limp body, which had been resting on Tager's shoulder, vanished.

That infuriated him.

"Hold it right there!" Raising his voice in a roar of anger, Ragna swung his sword and attacked Tager.

Tager quickly raised his arm to block the full power attack. The metal device attached to the Red Devil's thick arm clashed with Ragna's sword, producing a jarring metallic sound and violent sparks.

Still in their clashing stance, Ragna glared at the red giant, looking like he was about to bite him.

"What do you think you're doing?! Did you sic that thing on me!?" Ragna pressed him harshly, his anger he couldn't unleash on the girl now directed at Tager.

Tager had said "collection." He had appeared here for that reason. That meant he had known the girl would be here beforehand. Why? The reason was obvious: Sector Seven had been managing that girl in the first place.

"Good work on the cooperation, Ragna the Bloodedge."

"Wha-"

It wasn't Tager who answered Ragna. A low female voice that wasn't there seemed to be speaking directly into his head.

Startled by the sudden voice, Ragna instinctively jumped back, putting distance between himself and Tager. But he immediately understood. He remembered this voice as well. Like Tager's, it was the voice he had heard a few days ago in front of the Cauldron in Kagutsuchi.

"You... you're Kokonoe. From Sector Seven." Ragna took a stance as if threatening her. In place of the unseen voice's owner, he shot a sharp glare at Tager, who was present. "What do you mean by 'cooperation'? What the hell was that thing in the first place?! That thing was..."

"That's the Boundary Interface Prime Field No. 11, Lambda. I retrieved it after it was discarded at the Ibukido ruins and rebuilt it myself." Kokonoe irritably responded to Ragna’s harsh words, brushing him off.

Just as he thought. Ragna clenched his teeth as if baring his fangs and tightened his grip on his sword.

Her identity was easy enough to guess from her appearance and the number on her chest. But it carried a different weight hearing it directly from an actual person involved.

The intensity of the emotions welling up within him was also completely different.

Whether or not she saw Ragna's boiling fury from the bottom of his stomach, Kokonoe continued in her same emotionless tone.

"I sent it to you for a startup test, but... it seems it's hard to say it's functioning properly. To go out of control with an excessive reaction to the Azure Grimoire. Using the soul of No. 13 may have backfired."

"Hey. What did you just say?"

"What? The startup test? The Azure Grimoire?"

"Not that! What you said about the soul!"

"Oh, that." Kokonoe spoke in a very blunt, completely emotionless voice.

Her attitude was getting on Ragna's nerves. It felt like his stomach was burning. The hand gripping the hilt tightened, as if trying to wound himself.

Kokonoe's voice came from the communicator of Tager, who stood silently.

"No. 11 was severely damaged, and it had a problem with its startup on its own. So I took the soul from No. 13, who you threw into the Boundary, and reused it. I completely erased both of their memories to avoid a rejection, but it was probably triggered by your Azure Grimoire. It seems both of their memories temporarily returned, which interfered with its normal operation."

Her tone was as if she were inspecting some kind of device. In fact, that's what it was for Kokonoe. The Boundary Interface Prime Fields were artificial creations in the first place. Even though they had a human form, they were nothing more than a device and a weapon.

Ragna thought so too. That's why he had been traveling around the world, searching for and destroying them. And he intended to continue doing so.

But for some reason, he was feeling angry and irritated. Kokonoe's voice was so irritating that he couldn't stand it. Ragna squeezed out his unbearable feelings through his clenched teeth.

"Don't..."

Puzzled by the sight of Ragna looking down deeply, Tager quickly got into a stance.

Ragna charged forward, pulling his sword back as if to cleave through the stance itself.

"Don't mess with me!"

He swung the sword horizontally, in a straight line, with all his might. A dull metallic sound burst forth. Tager's thick arm, which was raised like a shield, blocked Ragna's sword once more. Ragna immediately pulled back his sword and swung it down diagonally. But this time, the blade was caught by the Red Devil's large hand, and its movement was sealed.

"Ugh... what should I do, Kokonoe?" Enduring the weight of Ragna, who was trying to push through despite being blocked, Tager asked with a slight hint of impatience to the other side of the communicator. The voice that answered was as melancholic as ever.

"Retreat. I can't be bothered with him forever. Noel Vermillion is the priority now. I have to get her before Terumi..."

At the name spoken by that sluggish voice, Ragna's expression changed.

"Noel? Noel Vermillion!"

It was almost a shout. Panic ran through Ragna's previously hostile eyes.

"That has nothing to do with you."

It must have been a slip of the tongue. With only those words, Kokonoe cut the communication with a small, rough sound. Tager, left to fend for himself by his superior, kept Ragna's sword blocked and shook his head in exasperation.

"Good grief... Understood." With a small sigh, he gripped Ragna's sword firmly, then forcefully lifted and threw both the sword and its owner.

Ragna was a well-trained man. But for Tager, dealing with him was like handling a doll. He was easily thrown, and Ragna landed on his back on a fallen table. Tager spared Ragna a glance as he created a loud noise, then turned his back.

Ragna dragged himself up as if to pursue him.

"Wait, Red Devil!"

Perhaps it was kindness that made the Red Devil turn around at his shout. After sending a glance over his hulking shoulder, obscured by sunglasses, Tager said nothing more and went outside through the now-enlarged entrance.

If Ragna had run out immediately, it might not have been difficult to catch up.

But he didn't do that.

What was he going to do if he ran? Catch up to the Red Devil and slash at him again? For what? For Lambda and Noel?

For Lambda and Noel... to do what? Save them? Kill them?

(Kill? No, they're Prime Fields. They're not human, so... I would 'destroy' them, right?)

His brow furrowed without him realizing it. It wasn't because of indignation. His mind was a jumbled mess. It was tangled and unclear. It was so unpleasant he couldn't stand it.

Hadn't he just decided to focus only on finding and killing the root of all evil, Yuuki Terumi?

(That's right, Yuuki Terumi. If I kill him... if I kill him...)

Everything should be resolved. The matter with Lambda, and the matter with Noel.

The thought felt like an excuse he was making to deceive himself.

"Ah, damn it!"

Cursing at no one in particular, Ragna raised his sword and slammed it into the remnants of a nearby table. The tabletop shattered and scattered on the floor.

As he impulsively stepped on the fragments and was about to leave the restaurant, Ragna suddenly noticed something.

The girl who should have been lying there was gone. She had probably woken up during the commotion and quickly fled the restaurant.

He hadn't finished talking to her either. He might have been able to hear about Terumi.

"This is annoying..."

Nothing was going right. Ragna let out a small burst of frustration by roughly scratching his head and stepped outside with large strides. He started walking without even thinking about his direction. Standing still was painful.

The back of his mind felt heavy and suffocating, as if it were stuffed with bells.

It was around the same time that Ragna had fought Tager for barging in.

Through the evening crowds of Orient Town, a small figure wearing tattered cloth like a cape was running past with lightning speed.

From their height and restless way of running, it was clear they were a child, not just small.

From the tattered hood they had haphazardly pulled over their head, a surprisingly pretty girl's face and soft-looking platinum blonde hair were visible. In her thin arms, which extended from under the cape, she held something wrapped in old cloth that was taller than her.

The running girl skillfully weaved through the adults like a kitten. As she took deep, ragged breaths that made her small chest heave, she began to talk in two different tones.

"W-wait a minute, Luna~. Don't be in such a hurry~..."

"Shut up, Sena! Just be quiet and run! I don't know what's going on, but it's definitely better to get away now! If we get caught by that spiky-haired guy, there's no telling what kind of forced labor he'll make us do to pay for the meal!"

"Forced labor... He didn't seem like that kind of person, though..."

"Luna knows. That guy is a lolicon pervert."

The slow, boyish voice was Sena, and the strong-willed, rough girl's voice was Luna. Those who knew this girl, in whose single body two personalities always coexisted, called them Platinum the Trinity.

Luna, Sena, or rather, Platinum, stopped at the end of the street and looked back with full alertness. It seemed that the spiky-haired lolicon pervert, Ragna the Bloodedge, wasn't chasing them.

He was probably still fighting the red-skinned giant who seemed to be able to manipulate magnetism. It was indeed the best time to escape.

"Alright! We've had our fill, so let's get back to the mission Lord Jubei asked us to do!"

With a satisfied smile at her flawless strategy, Luna shouldered the long luggage she had been holding against her chest. She straightened her tattered cape and pulled her hood down deep over her eyes, then braced themselves.

"First, we're going to see a guy named Bang in Ronin-Gai. Let's go, Sena!"

"Okay~. But Luna, you can't just start a fight with him, okay~?"

"What are you talking about, Sena? There's no way Luna would just start a fight with a person we've just met. Gosh, Sena, you're so nagging."

"Eh, what...?"

If you were just listening, it would sound like two close siblings, but in reality, it was just one girl strangely switching between different tones as Platinum the Trinity cheerfully left Orient Town.

3

January 3, 2200 - 17:03

When I left the Kaka Clan village, which was like a cave, I felt a stream of cold air approaching nightfall, even in the lower layer city.

It must be close to dinnertime. From the small houses I passed, I could hear the sounds of meal preparation.

Thinking of those sounds as if they were from a distant, different world, Noel walked along by herself, looking dejected.

Her appearance, in the blue Novus Orbis Librarium soldier uniform, stood out terribly against the scenery of Orient Town. Every time she walked on the path paved with rough metal plates in her matching uniform boots, her disheveled golden hair tickled the back of her neck from under her blue uniform hat.

She was heading to a certain clinic here in Orient Town. She was on her way to the clinic of Litchi Faye-Ling, who was hiding her while she was on the run from the NOL on charges of desertion.

Noel understood how dangerous her situation was. But no matter what, her feelings weighed down her steps.

As she walked through the tangled alleyways, Noel quietly placed a white hand on her chest, which was far from ample.

There was one reason for her sadness and heavy heart.

"Ragna-san..."

She let the words fall like a single tear.

Under Noel's hand, the clothes that had been torn during her fight with the black monster called Arakune were clumsily mended. She had borrowed the tools from the Kaka Clan village. Under the slightly stretched stitches... there was a strange mark. A pair of spread wings and the number "12."

Noel didn't know how long it had been there or why the mark existed. There was no way she could know what the mark meant.

But Ragna was different. When he saw the mark on her chest peeking through the tear in her clothes, he looked as if he had seen something he couldn't believe.

That was probably the reaction of a person who knew what this mark was. And this mark was probably something very bad for him.

Every time she remembered Ragna's expression, which had frozen as if the blood had drained from his face, a chill ran down her spine. For just a moment, she remembered feeling an intuition that she might be killed.

"Prime Field..."

When he saw the mark, Ragna had definitely said that. "Are you a Prime Field?"

(What's a Prime Field? What does Ragna-san know? What am I?)

The more she thought about it, the more anxious she became. Because she didn't know. She didn't know anything about herself.

She was rescued during the Ikaruga Civil War in the 5th Hierarchical City of Ibukido, which had a bombing incident, and was adopted by her current parents, the Vermillion family. Her time only truly began from there. To Noel, the person she was before that was practically non-existent.

(Who... am I?)

The hand on her chest began to tremble slightly, and Noel gripped it tightly, trying to suppress her bursting anxiety.

She was scared. She felt like she was the only one who didn't know anything, and that she was walking down a path she shouldn't, even though she was told it was safe...

"Oh, Doctor! The soldier is back!"

Suddenly, a cheerful voice was heard nearby, and Noel came back to her senses as if waking from a dream.

Looking around in a state of confusion, she realized she had somehow made it back to Litchi's clinic. In the familiar scenery, a brown-skinned girl was sticking her head out of a window and looking at her. It was Linhua, Litchi's assistant.

Invited by Linhua, who was waving her thin arms, Noel trotted back to the clinic. As she entered, a tall woman with her long black hair tied up high came out of a room in the back, walking quickly.

This was Litchi Faye-Ling, the owner of the clinic and a doctor. Her eyelashes were so long they seemed to touch the thin-framed glasses she was wearing, and her full lips, accentuated by red lipstick, gave off a sensual charm in every gesture.

Litchi, who was beautiful enough to make even a woman like Noel stare, curved her alluring lips into a smile of relief.

"Thank goodness, I was just about to go out and look for you."

"Huh? Did something happen?" Noel tilted her head and asked, surprised by Litchi's words.

Litchi immediately took out a piece of paper and held it out. It was a memo folded in two. Carelessly, Noel opened it, and her expression tensed.

"This...!"

Written on it was a message from her best friend, Makoto. There was a signature at the end, but the nostalgic, free-flowing handwriting itself indicated it was written by her friend.

Looking up in surprise, Litchi gave her a gentle nod.

"She suddenly came back about two hours ago. But she seemed to be in a big hurry, so she gave me this memo for you and immediately rushed out."

"But since you weren't coming back, we couldn't just look inside, and we were worried it might be urgent, so we were just talking about how it might be better to go and find you." Linhua added, leaning against a window.

Noel looked at the memo again.

"To Noel-chan. There's a sighting of someone who looks like Captain Hazama in Orient Town. Let's change the meeting place to the plaza behind the NOL's branch. The branch is still empty, so no one will be there. I'll make sure to be there tomorrow evening at 15:00. Please, don't do anything reckless. Makoto."

The name "Captain Hazama" made her flinch. Fortunately, she hadn't encountered him, but just the thought that he might be nearby was enough to terrify her.

She did not want to be found by that man.

Noel folded the memo back up, looked up at Litchi with a serious expression, and straightened her back.

"It seems we're changing the meeting place to somewhere else. Litchi-san, Linhua-san, thank you so much for hiding me all this time." She almost saluted, but stopped herself and bowed politely to Litchi and Linhua.

"Thank you" wasn't nearly enough to express her gratitude. They had treated her injuries, provided her with food and a warm bed, and even given her the opportunity to reunite with Ragna the Bloodedge.

While the outcome of that last part wasn't what she'd hoped for, she still gained a lot from meeting Litchi.

"Does that mean you're leaving here?" Linhua asked, her face clouded. Her dissatisfied expression was a display of her concern.

Noel acted a little more mature and smiled to reassure her.

"It's okay. Kagutsuchi is big, and there are lots of places to hide."

"It's better if I don't ask for the details, right?" Litchi said with a caring tone and lightly adjusted her glasses with her delicate fingertips.

"Yes. I'm sorry."

Noel nodded solemnly. She felt indebted to Litchi. That was precisely why she didn't want to get her any more involved. The people of Orient Town were already not fond of the NOL. She wanted to avoid causing any more trouble for Litchi with NOL-related matters.

Sensing her feelings, Litchi crossed her arms under her ample chest and shrugged with a bitter smile.

"Then it can't be helped. I can't meddle in things I don't know about. But please be careful not to do anything dangerous. You're my patient, after all."

Litchi's kindness in giving her a different pretext than "NOL soldier" gave her a warm feeling in her chest.

Litchi was a good person. It made her so simply happy, and Noel bowed again, this time more deeply than before.

"Thank you for everything. Now, if you'll excuse me!" She raised her head, quickly turned, and left the small clinic.

The dazzling neon lights of Orient Town's main street were spilling into the alley. In another hour or two, the main street of the lower city would be bustling with a crush of people.

If she could get lost in the crowd, the chances of being discovered would decrease.

After giving one last bow to Litchi and Linhua, who were seeing her off from the round window, Noel nimbly took off.

Her worries were still clinging to her heart. But for now, she had to move.

As she ran, Noel thought that it was a good thing Makoto had come. Without her, she might not have been able to move at all by now.

(I want to see Makoto... soon...)

Clutching the hastily written memo in her hand like a charm, Noel slipped into the main street of Orient Town.

A few minutes after the golden-haired, green-eyed woman soldier in the blue uniform was quietly seen off, there was a knock on the front door.

Linhua had just realized she was out of seasoning while trying to make dinner and had rushed out to go shopping. Maybe she had forgotten her wallet. Or maybe it was a patient.

Thinking that, Litchi, who was organizing patient charts alone in the hospital, stood up from her chair and opened the door without any caution.

"Yes?"

As the door opened slightly at her question, revealing a glimpse of the person on the other side, Litchi felt her fingertips freeze with tension.

As if taking over the movement she had instinctively stopped, the visitor opened the door on their own.

Standing there was neither her cute assistant nor her familiar patients. In the first place, he wasn't an inhabitant of Orient Town.

It was a tall man in a black suit.

"Hello. It's a pleasure to meet you. My name is Hazama, and I belong to the Novus Orbis Librarium's Intelligence Department. You're Litchi Faye-Ling, aren't you?"

The man, who introduced himself with a seemingly polite but somewhat condescending tone, lightly adjusted the hat on his head and gave a bow.

"The Librarium... what business could you possibly have at a hospital in the lower city?"

He was a man with a sinister aura.

When Litchi's gaze intensified, he pulled back the corners of his mouth and smiled eerily.

"Please don't be so wary. I have no intention of harming you or anyone around you."

"That sounds like a threat."

"Oh, my apologies. But please don't misunderstand. I have some useful information for you."

Litchi's disgusted expression changed because of the words the man spoke next.

"Your friend who lives in the sewers of Kagutsuchi... would you like to save him?"

4

January 3, 2200 - 18:50

On the outskirts of the middle layer city of Kagutsuchi, an old museum was built.

It was far from the main street, located in a secluded area in the middle layer that didn't receive any sunlight all day. The solemn atmosphere of the brick building also made it look terribly ominous at this time of night.

Perhaps because of its eeriness or its inconspicuous location, there were hardly any visitors after the evening, and it was rare to find any guests remaining near closing time.

It was a quiet, hushed museum no matter when you visited.

Ten minutes until closing time.

There was no one else in the building. A single girl was walking through the dimly lit halls, where the lights were lowered to protect the exhibits, while she looked at the glass cases displaying rare rocks and fossil fragments excavated during the construction of Kagutsuchi.

She was a girl with a light but steady stride. She wore a black poncho and a matching black hat on her short brown hair. Her boots were also black, and their slightly raised heels made a clacking sound on the cold stone floor with every step she took.

With her dark eyes and a large, bushy squirrel tail swaying behind her, this was Second Lieutenant Makoto Nanaya of the Novus Orbis Librarium’s Intelligence Department.

Her feet had the pretense of casually looking at the exhibits, but they were headed straight for the innermost room of the museum.

"This is amazing, isn't it? They say it's a bone from tens of millions of years ago."

The innermost room displayed several dinosaur fossils.

As soon as she entered the room, which had an especially high ceiling, Makoto called out in a friendly tone to the person who was already there, standing in front of a partially assembled dinosaur fossil.

The large, muscular figure was looking up at the ancient giant in the faint orange light.

If Makoto was a girl of a different race, a demi-human known as a beastkin, then he was also an unusual being, different from a normal human. His overly sturdy body, his unnaturally tall stature, and his striking red skin. These physical characteristics were a perfect match for those of a cyborg soldier from Sector Seven, an organization hostile to Makoto's NOL, commonly known as the "Red Devil."

"An NOL soldier? What are you doing here?" he asked in a low, muffled voice, turning halfway to look at Makoto. He was indeed that "Red Devil."

Makoto grinned, the corners of her mouth curling up.

"It's a pleasure to meet you. Actually, I'm looking for something. It's an animal called 'Gnu.' Do you know it?"

"'Gnu'?" The Red Devil, Tager, asked again, his already harsh brow furrowing even more.

Makoto couldn't tell what kind of look he was giving her, as his eyes were hidden behind yellow sunglasses.

But at least there was no hostility. There wasn't even suspicion.

On the contrary. The words Makoto had spoken clearly conveyed her special mission to Tager.

"Kokonoe. I've made contact with 'Gnu'."

Tager placed a thick hand, befitting his size, to his ear and muttered. Not to Makoto, the black-clad soldier in front of him, but to his superior on the other side of the comms.

"I've confirmed it on this end as well. It seems to be correct."

A low female voice responded from the other side of the comms. It belonged to Professor Kokonoe, a scientist of Sector Seven and Tager's creator. However, that voice didn't reach Makoto.

"Understood."

Answering briefly, Tager turned back to Makoto. In contrast to his rough appearance, Tager extended his hand to her in a polite manner.

"Let me have the data."

"Here you go."

With the demeanor of a casual conversation happening in the street, Makoto took a chip from under her poncho. It was so small it was no bigger than her thumbnail. She placed it on Tager's outstretched palm.

"Confirm it."

Following Kokonoe's instructions, Tager inserted the received chip into a terminal behind his ear.

Data analysis began immediately.

The contents of the chip were about the movements of the Duodecim, who formed the core of the NOL. Specifically, the location of each family head.

This was, of course, classified information. It wasn't information that should be given to an outsider, let alone to Sector Seven, which was in an antagonistic relationship with the NOL.

In other words, this was a major data leak.

"So? How's it going, Red Devil-san?"

Makoto looked up at the giant, who was in the middle of analyzing the data, tilting her head as if to peek in. Her expression showed no sign of guilt or shyness. She fully understood what kind of chip she had given Tager and what that act meant. Furthermore, she was aware of the intentions of the Mutsuki family, the source of this chip.

Tager, having finished the analysis, nodded at Makoto with the chip still stored in his head.

"I've received it."

"Good. That's a relief." Makoto replied with a friendly smile, in a tone as if they were already close friends.

Makoto had not come to Kagutsuchi on an official mission as an NOL soldier. She had infiltrated Kagutsuchi with this chip, which was entrusted to her by the current head of the Mutsuki family, one of the Duodecim, to whom she had a personal connection.

But Makoto had another purpose as well. From her perspective, this was the main part of the conversation.

"And hey. I'm sorry to ask for a favor, but could you connect me to Professor Kokonoe? There's something I want to ask her."

"Something you want to ask?"

The plan was for the agent to leave as soon as the data was handed over. Tager's voice took on a cautious tone at Makoto's actions, which deviated from the plan.

But just then, as if to interrupt him, Tager's comms switched from closed to open.

"I don't mind. What do you want?"

"Kokonoe," Tager said, his voice sharp as if to scold her. But Kokonoe paid him no mind and waited for Makoto's response with the line open. She wasn't being friendly toward Makoto, nor was she showing her any compassion. She was just trying to determine if what Makoto had to say would be useful to her.

That attitude was enough. In fact, she felt safer talking to someone with such a selfish attitude.

"Sector Seven is looking for Noel Vermillion. Right?"

With a direct gaze and a confident smile on her face, Makoto looked at Tager and Kokonoe on the other side, as if challenging them.

Noel was a special child. She herself probably didn't know it. Makoto had only recently found out by chance.

That child was not a normal human.

The reason the NOL and Makoto's superior, Hazama, were so strangely concerned about Noel was because she was a special existence. And she'd heard Sector Seven also wanted Makoto's friend for the same reason.

"Prime Field." It seemed that's what a child like Noel was called.

"It's not Sector Seven. It's me." Kokonoe replied, sounding somewhat displeased.

Makoto's smile deepened.

"Then that's even better for me."

Contrary to her lighthearted tone, Makoto's gaze was sincere.

One thing was clear. The NOL and Hazama, who wanted to get their hands on Noel, did not see her as a human being. They didn't recognize her fears, her sadness, or her indignation as belonging to a single girl.

If she were to stay with the NOL, something bad was bound to happen to Noel.

Looking up at the massive body of the Red Devil, who was still frowning suspiciously, Makoto straightened her posture as if she were facing a superior officer.

"Professor Kokonoe. I request that you personally protect Noel Vermillion, Lieutenant of the Novus Orbis Librarium's 4th Squadron."

There were no functioning security cameras in the remote museum on the outskirts of town, and the procedure for entering only required a simple confirmation without any paperwork. According to the records, neither Makoto Nanaya of the NOL nor Tager of Sector Seven had visited the museum. Fifteen minutes after closing time, when the janitor came to check the locks, there was no one in the room where the dragon, said to have roamed the earth in ancient times, looked down upon.

Chapter 2: The despair - The truth

1

January 4, 2200 - 4:46

It was still too early for the eastern sky to turn white, and Ronin-Gai, built in the lowest layer of Kagutsuchi, was naturally in a deep sleep.

Even though it was a town of the remaining Ikaruga rebels led by a ninja chieftain, most of them were just ordinary people. There were many women and children. Hardly anyone would be walking around outside at this hour.

Jin chose this time for that reason.

Ronin-Gai had no Ars Magus streetlights, so it was completely sealed in darkness once the house’s lights went out.

With the faint moonlight from the upper layers to help him, Jin was getting ready in the bedroom he had borrowed.

He put on his blue NOL uniform jacket and white gloves, gripping his hands tightly.

"It's enough."

His wounds weren't healed. But if he could forget the pain, his body would move without any problems. The troublesome high fever had also subsided.

There was no longer a need to stay here. No, he couldn't afford to waste any more time here.

He clenched his fist again, not to check its condition this time, but to steel himself. Jin took the sword that was leaning against the wall and turned on his heel. He then left the bedroom where he’d been taken care of without hesitation.

When he went outside through the back door, the outer air, stagnant with seithr, was waiting for him.

The moonlight was distant and unreliable. But it was no problem to follow a path he had walked a few times. Jin walked straight, following the path that led out of Ronin-Gai.

He hadn't said a word to the owner of the house, Bang Shishigami. But he probably didn't need to.

It was true that thanks to his consideration, Jin had been able to escape the hands of the NOL and receive treatment. But no matter how much that scruffy ninja spoke of justice, Jin was still an enemy of Ikaruga. Just as he felt no sympathy for the Ikaruga people's lives in the harsh environment of the lowest layer.

Jin didn't have the time to get involved in such things in the first place. His mind was focused on something else.

Ragna the Bloodedge.

Tsubaki Yayoi.

The two names, the two faces, were seared into his mind, making him anxious.

He had to find his brother. Why? To kill him. But why kill him? Whose intent to kill was it?

He had to find Tsubaki. Why? To see her. But why see her? What would he say to her if he saw her?

His thoughts were dizzying. Even though the feeling that he had to act was only growing. And besides...

(*...Why?*)

His mouth twisted into a bitter expression, and Jin looked at the blue-sheathed sword in his hand. The phenomenon weapon, Mucro Algesco: Yukianesa. He had used it as his beloved sword for a long time.

But for some reason, his familiar beloved sword, which was like an extension of his arm, hadn't come out of its sheath since last night.

The darkness of the night hid Jin's figure well. After leaving Ronin-Gai without being seen by anyone, Jin stopped and placed his hand on the hilt of Yukianesa.

He tried pulling it lightly, like he always did. Then he tried pulling it with all the strength he could muster.

"Ugh..." A small groan escaped Jin's lips, and his breath turned into a white cloud in the cold air. Just like when he had tried before midnight, Yukianesa didn't budge. It remained heavily silent like a sculpture, as if there was no blade to begin with.

(*What the hell is going on?*)

A bitter expression spread across his face without him realizing.

What could he do if he encountered Ragna or Tsubaki in this state? Wasn't what he was doing just a short-sighted rampage and nothing more than an escape?

"I know... I know that..."

He knew it, but what was he supposed to do about it? Jin muttered in frustration to the shadows of the night.

The confusion was severely disturbing his mind. He couldn't understand why Yukianesa wouldn't come out. If only Yukianesa would...

"...If it would just come out, then what? Dammit!"

Unable to hold back, Jin slammed the sheathed Yukianesa against a nearby iron pole. The armored sound was clumsy. How ridiculous. Still-

(I... I have to go...)

Twisting his face, Jin started walking again, not even knowing where he was supposed to go.

Wind suddenly swirled in front of him. Accompanied by the fragrant scent of flowers, which was out of place in the seithr-smelling lower layer, the wind softly unraveled and vanished. Then there was the figure of a single girl carrying a bat-faced parasol.

"You look pathetic, Mr. Hero."

She was a girl with a height and build of about twelve or thirteen years old, with golden hair tied up in two ponytails with large ribbons that shone in the moonlight. But there was no childlike innocence in her large, crimson eyes; there was a cold, transcendental look.

It was clear at first glance that she was no ordinary person. If a girl in a fine black dress were wandering around in a lower layer city at this hour, she was either inhuman or an illusion seen by a groggy mind.

"Who are you?" Jin glared sharply at the girl in front of him, pulling Yukianesa back and taking a stance.

The girl holding the bat parasol like an umbrella- Rachel- sneered and narrowed her crimson eyes.

"My, are you going to put on a show for me? Do you intend to cut me with a sword that won't even leave its sheath?"

Jin's throat tightened at the cold, scornful words. He reflexively reached for his sword's hilt, but his body went rigid and he stopped himself. That's right. It wouldn't come out. But how did this girl know that?

"My name is Rachel Alucard."

"Alucard?" Jin frowned tightly. He had heard the name before. The Alucard family, a clan of vampires that lived outside of reason. They had been watching over the world of humanity since long ago.

Even so, it was nothing more than a fairy tale, like the legend of the Six Heroes who fought for humanity's survival a hundred years ago. No matter how much of an unusual aura the girl in front of him had, it was an unbelievable story. He would be more convinced if she had told him it was an illusion.

The girl, a resident of fantasy, gave a mesmerizing smile that was unbecoming of a girl and slowly blinked once.

"Pathetic and arrogant hero. As long as you can't even handle a toy like that, you'll never be able to defeat Ragna the Bloodedge."

Rachel Alucard saw right through him again. Jin secretly bit his lip. He knew it even if she didn't have to say it. But it still stung because she said it out loud.

Jin took his hand off the hilt and stood up, then took a step forward. He stepped forward with his hard boots, tapping the ground that had changed from dirt to metal. His expression no longer held any of the hostility or wariness he had directed at Rachel. Freezing his expression and his thoughts, Jin looked away from the vampire girl.

As she said, there was nothing he could do now. But he couldn't stop walking. If he did, everything will stop. Everything about him would stop.

"You brothers are both idiots." He heard Rachel's sigh of amazed contempt. A detached whisper grazed his ears, which were cold in the night air. "Then... you won't be able to save anything."

The wind swirled with her breath, scattering the scent of roses, and Rachel vanished. Jin turned around without thinking. But the girl was no longer there. All that remained was the sweet scent of flowers slowly drifting away and melting into the night.

In the out of place illusory scent, the girl's arrogant voice spoke to him, as if it were also an illusion.

"The person you want to meet is heading to the Librarium's branch. Everything will converge there..." The prophetic words ended with a faint smile. "I wonder who will arrive first, you or Mr. Hero?"

With that last phrase, both the voice and the scent of flowers vanished somewhere.

Jin waited for a few seconds, but the scent of flowers wasn't carried back by the wind. All that remained was the seithr and the smell of rust from the complex steel frame that supported the Hierarchical City.

Silently, Jin moved his feet, which had unintentionally stopped. His steps weren't light.

The words Rachel had thrown at him felt like a cold blade pressed against his throat. What she had thrown at him was his own weakness.

He felt as if everything was slipping through his fingers.

(*'Hero'...*)

One thing that bothered him was that single word Rachel had left behind.

A word to denote someone other than himself. Jin didn't know who it was.

Moreover, he had no way of knowing this “Hero” would set foot in the same city a few hours later.

2

January 4, 2200 - 9:26

He was once called a "Hero."

But the Hero eventually vanished, and his achievements and valor became legends, not history. How many people today would recognize the existence of the former hero as fact?

The Six Heroes.

Among the Six Heroes who appeared during the Dark War a hundred years ago, there was a warrior who led the charge for humanity and brought his sword down on the monstrous calamity, the Black Beast.

His name was Hakumen. As his name suggested, his face was covered by a white, expressionless mask, his sturdy body was clad in a menacing white outfit, and on his back, he carried the phenomenon weapon, the longsword Interfectum Malus: Ookami.

One of the Six Heroes, a legendary swordsman said to have beheaded the Black Beast with a single stroke. He was now in the upper layer of the 13th Hierarchical City, under the sunlight.

Only a few days had passed since he was released from the binding array in Kokonoe's laboratory by Rachel's hand. It would have been impossible to reach Kagutsuchi in such a short period of time without taking an Ars Magus ship.

Despite this, Hakumen was not exhausted, and he had run all the way here on his two feet.

The "time" Rachel had set seemed to be coming to an end much sooner than he'd expected.

Instead of entering the organized city, Hakumen chose a route with as few people as possible, moving forward on his clawed feet. The air in the upper layers was thin and clear of seithr, making it feel like a completely different world to him, a being who had been on the ground just a few hours ago.

In the sunny upper layer, there were shadows, not just darkness and secluded corners. He crossed the regularly laid tiled path and was about to step into the dark shadow that lay beyond.

That was when a foot hit the ground.

"You there, stop!"

From the sunny side of the path, which he thought was empty, a woman's voice called out, clearly directed at Hakumen. It was a voice of warning. And... it was a voice Hakumen remembered.

Shaking his silvery hair, which flowed from the top of his head to his back like a tail, Hakumen turned around.

There was no one around. There was only one girl who was slightly out of breath, as if she had been running to catch up from somewhere.

She wore a hood and a long, white cloak that completely covered her body. From the gap in her hood, which was pulled down low enough to hide her eyes, her distinctive hair color could be seen.

Long, vivid camellia red hair, as if dyed in the colors of a flower.

The moment he saw the color of her hair and her sky-blue eyes, Hakumen stopped moving and talking, and he just stood there.

"This is a restricted area under the jurisdiction of the Librarium. If you proceed any further, I will carry out forced removal under the name of the Novus Orbis Librarium. Leave this place immediately."

The girl who spoke these stern words was Tsubaki Yayoi. She was a Lieutenant belonging to the Novus Orbis Librarium and the daughter of the Duodecim, the Yayoi family.

Tsubaki stared straight at Hakumen with a strong, unwavering gaze.

At her sight, Hakumen's memories stirred. Was it a memory from the past, or a memory from an even more distant past? Sentimentality disturbed his mind.

When Hakumen remained silent, unable to react, Tsubaki quickly closed the distance, still staring at the tall, white figure.

Up close, she was surprisingly small. The camellia-red girl looked up at Hakumen’s unusual appearance without any fear. She was a little shorter than the figure in Hakumen's memory.

"Answer my question. Who are you?" Tsubaki's voice was tinged with suspicion as she asked. It wasn't a wariness that came from not knowing Hakumen's identity; it was a doubt in the opposite sense. In other words, a concrete guess about his identity.

"That appearance... it's just like... No, but that can't be right." Even as she denied it, Tsubaki's words were as good as saying she had an idea of who he was. Her flustered sky-blue eyes eventually settled on the man in front of her, as if she had made a decision. Regaining her composure, Tsubaki asked, "I'm sorry, but may I ask your name?"

Her voice, a little more tense than before, seemed to have already guessed the name he was about to give. In that case, there was no point in betraying that guess. Above all, Hakumen had no other name to give.

"My name is Hakumen." He answered without any inflection. The moment he did, Tsubaki's expression stiffened with tension and surprise.

"Hakumen... Th-*the* Hakumen of the Six Heroes?! The features certainly match, but... but I can't believe it... no, I can't believe you're still alive!"

Tsubaki's hand, which had been poised to draw her weapon at any moment, fumbled at her chest, and she stared at Hakumen with large, wide-open eyes. Hakumen returned her gaze with a heavy nod.

"Indeed."

From her words, "I can't believe you're still alive," he remembered that the present time was a timeline ninety years after the end of the Dark War, the stage for the so-called Six Heroes legend.

To the girl in front of him, a war a hundred years ago was probably a story in a book, no matter how many times she had heard it. Her confusion and shock were understandable.

"Oh... I-I apologize!" Gasping audibly, Tsubaki threw back her hood and saluted beautifully. Her red hair, exposed to the sunlight, was vivid and dazzling. "I am Lieutenant Tsubaki Yayoi of the Novus Orbis Librarium. I-I never thought that Lord Hakumen of the Six Heroes would be in a place like this! I was terribly rude!"

"Do you know me?"

"Of course I know you! I learned about you in the Military Academy and read a lot about you in history books. We didn't have any war photographs, but there were lots of descriptions of your appearance..."

Tsubaki, who had just been in a stiff salute, clenched her hands into fists in front of her chest and leaned forward, looking up at Hakumen as she pleaded in a torrent of words. But she must have come back to her senses immediately, as she covered her flushed cheeks with her hands.

"I'm so sorry, I got carried away." She suppressed her voice, which had become high-pitched, and elegantly regained her composure. She looked just like an innocent girl, even though she was a Librarium soldier.

If his mask had eyes, Hakumen would have narrowed them. It was a feeling accompanied by a sense of emptiness. As if she were trying to fill her heart by feeding on an illusion.

"So that was one of her sides."

The words that escaped him were indeed directed at an illusion. The illusion of a girl with a flower's name. A clean and pure girl with red hair and sky-blue eyes.

Hakumen’s eyeless mask stared at Tsubaki, who looked puzzled. And then he turned his mask to the strange hat on her head of vivid hair.

It had been bothering him ever since she took off her hood. It wasn't a stylish hat that a young girl would prefer to wear. It was white and old-fashioned, with a decoration that looked just like an eyeball, giving off an unnatural presence.

Hakumen had an idea about that strange hat, as well as the equipment Tsubaki wore under her long cloak.

"Lieutenant Tsubaki Yayoi. Is that the Izayoi?"

"Yes. It's the Ars Armegis: Izayoi. You knew about it?"

Whether it was because she was asked a question by Hakumen, or because her special equipment was pointed out, Tsubaki proudly lifted her chin.

"Now that I think about it, the Izayoi was also used during the Dark War, right? Maybe you saw it back then?"

"Yes." In response to Tsubaki's modest, bright expression, Hakumen answered with a bitter groan. With the same bitterness, he continued, his tone stronger. "Lieutenant Tsubaki Yayoi, if you intend to use it, stop. That is a dangerous weapon."

"With all due respect, Lord Hakumen. I am aware of the danger... that it robs the user of their sight in exchange for power."

"It does not rob you of sight. Izayoi robs you of light."

The result was mainly the loss of sight. But the end of the Izayoi user Hakumen had seen during the Dark War was not just becoming blind. They were robbed of their light, lost their power, and had their heart torn apart. The only thing they could hold onto until the very end was their small pride.

The past user of Izayoi, who had the same camellia red hair and sky-blue eyes as Tsubaki, cried on a simple bed and died as a result of using up all her power.

"The end of a person whose light has been stolen... is a sad one."

"Lord Hakumen..."

Finding emotion in the white mask's words, Tsubaki muttered with a hint of sympathy. But under her eyelids, which she had blinked and lifted, her sky-blue eyes still held a strong light.

"Thank you for your concern, but the Izayoi is necessary for my mission. There is a person I... want to save. For that purpose..." Saying that, Tsubaki clutched at the chest of her cloak, as if embracing something precious within.

"...To save, huh."

The words that escaped him weren't what Hakumen had intended. His murmur, tinged with self-mockery, made Tsubaki look up with a questioning expression.

A fingertip covered in inhuman attire touched her soft cheek.

She should've been scared of the ominous-looking mask, but Tsubaki looked up at Hakumen with an astonishingly serious expression. The name "Six Heroes" must have been what made her do so.

Her simplemindedness, which made her completely forget her composure the moment she realized that the white armored figure was "Hakumen," made him feel like a bitter smile was welling up inside him.

At the same time, he felt dizzy. His faint memories and the sight in front of him overlapped.

"...I could not save her."

"Huh?"

"It was a long, long time ago. There was a woman by my side. We grew up together since we were children, and she always took care of me. Although she was a bit nagging at times."

"A childhood friend? I have one too, a very important person who has been with me since I was little. He probably thinks I'm nagging, too."

"Perhaps."

The girl's expression, as she listened happily, was terribly dazzling to the eyeless white oni. He was so blinded that his shoulders dropped with a soft sigh.

"She and I grew up together and learned together. She aspired to follow the same path as me and worked with me. Even as we grew older, we continued to be by each other's side, unchanged since we were children. But one day, I left her without a word and journeyed alone to a distant place. It was a selfish act based on my own judgment. She came after me, of course. And as a result... I lost her. She died protecting me."

This was a confession.

When she fell, with countless blades embedded in her body, he could only hold her.

He couldn't even grant her final wish when she smiled and said, "Let's go home."

It was a memory of his past, when he was foolish.

It was his past from a time when he wasn't Hakumen.

Jin Kisaragi.

It was the sin of his past, when he had a different name.

And so he carried that sin, crossed dimensions, abandoned his name, changed his form, and threw himself into history.

"If, by some chance, I were to see her again, I would want to apologize to her. To tell her I'm sorry for being so foolish. And I would want to say thank you. ...I was able to keep holding my sword even in the despair of the Dark War because her existence supported me. I was on the battlefield with the technique that bore her name... Even now."

Even now, her existence was deep within his heart. He couldn't take it out and show it to Tsubaki, who was here now, but he couldn't help but tell the girl in front of him about it.

"I'm... a little bit jealous of that woman." Tsubaki muttered the words, and a gentle smile appeared on her lips. Her narrowed eyes held a wistful sadness.

"Because I wasn't there for my friend... I think it's amazing that she was by your side and was able to protect you in the end. I can't help but feel a little jealous." Tsubaki said, her eyebrows lowered in a smile. But then her expression grew incredibly earnest as she gazed at Hakumen's mask. "I'm sure that woman was proud. Because she was able to protect someone important to her. Even if the result was a sad one... if it were me, I'm sure I'd be happy."

"Do you really think so?"

"Oh... s-sorry, I got carried away again!"

"No." Hakumen slowly shook his head as Tsubaki frantically covered her mouth. "My apologies. Thank you, Lieutenant Tsubaki Yayoi."

Those words were the most sincere expression of Hakumen's true feelings.

Like a series of photographs, a scene from the past replayed in his mind.

In a vast underground space, countless blades rushed toward him. His red-haired childhood friend suddenly jumped in front of them. The tips of the blades pierced her chest, and red droplets dripped from them.

Her smiling face in the end, and beyond her, the sight of his brother falling into the Cauldron, which was glowing red. He had thrown the girl's body aside and ran to retrieve his brother.

What happened to his childhood friend who was left alone after that? What about the other girl who died in a world that wasn't this one?

The accumulated sins must be reaped. These arms and legs exist only for that purpose.

"I must go now."

This was enough of indulging in sentimentality and comforting himself. Hakumen took a big step forward.

What would be the point if he were to be stopped again and chased? Hakumen passed by Tsubaki, intending to change his path. Just before he did, he stopped for a moment and turned toward the girl.

"Lieutenant. Stick to your own path. You should be able to save them even without that abominable weapon. Do not let your heart be warped."

"Y-yes! I will bear that in mind, Lord Hakumen!" Tsubaki straightened up in a salute again, with so much force it seemed like it could make a sound. Acknowledging her posture, Hakumen began walking.

The existence of the Izayoi was still a source of anxiety, but he no longer had the right to pry any further. The right belonged to another man who existed in this timeline. He might be able to fulfill everything he couldn't.

(...Maybe.)

As he walked, Hakumen was self-deprecating. Was he, of all people, hoping for such a thing, like that vampire? It was a foolish thought.

Hakumen's steps passed through the city, heading toward the highest layer, to the Novus Orbis Librarium's Kagutsuchi branch.

His destination was the Cauldron in the basement of the branch.

Terumi was trying to create something in Kagutsuchi. If that scheme failed, then all would be well. But if he succeeded, he would come to this Cauldron afterward.

There, he would sever both the thing he created and the man himself. That was his plan.

Tsubaki watched the tall white figure disappear down the path, still in a salute. After he was gone and a little time had passed-

"Haah... I-I was so nervous..."

Exhaling all the breath that had been caught in her chest, Tsubaki put her hands on her knees and slumped over.

The surrounding scenery, which she hadn't even noticed until now, suddenly came back into her consciousness. On the outskirts of Kagutsuchi's upper layer, it was an empty, cushiony area between the city and the NOL's jurisdiction, meant to prevent ordinary residents from wandering in.

It was truly a coincidence that she had passed through here. Tsubaki had no premonition whatsoever that such an encounter would occur just a few minutes ago.

(Hakumen of the Six Heroes... he was the real one, wasn't he?)

It was hard to believe that a hero who'd been active in a war a hundred years ago was still alive and well. But the person she had just seen was overwhelmingly powerful, as if he were beyond the bounds of a human being. A hundred years might not be a very long time for a hero like him. That's what she imagined.

It must have been because of the tension. Her heart was beating rapidly. It felt like a dream.

Because she had admired him ever since she was a child. Of all the legends of the Six Heroes, she was particularly impressed by the white-masked swordsman, Hakumen, who was the strongest and most memorable.

Not only had she encountered the person she admired, but she had even talked to him.

(Do not let your heart be warped... Yes, Lord Hakumen!)

Without saying it out loud, she chanted the words she had just heard in her mind, and Tsubaki secretly clenched her hands tightly to encourage herself.

The hero she admired told her she should be able to save them.

Could she save them?

Even as she asked herself that, Tsubaki was clearly aware of her feelings. She wanted to save them. She wanted to do something to save her adopted brother, Jin Kisaragi, and her best friend, Noel Vermillion.

Of course, she'd had mixed feelings. When Noel was chosen to be Jin's aide, a position Tsubaki had hoped for, she had felt a little jealous. She had also felt a small sense of dissatisfaction with Jin, who had found it hard to accept.

When Jin's and Noel's names were written side by side in the 4th Squadron's documents, she had bitten her lip, wishing her name was there instead...

But Jin had his place, and Noel had her place. And she had her own place.

Tsubaki's place right now was here. In the Zero Squadron, as a "Wing of Justice."

So what should she do from here to save the people she cared about? She had to think about that.

"Brother Jin, Noel... please be safe." She said it as if praying, and Tsubaki lifted her head.

Right in front of her, a man had suddenly appeared.

"Well, well, worrying about your target at this late stage. As expected of the young lady of the Yayoi family. So kind, isn't it?"

A black suit, a hat pulled down low, a pasted-on smile, and a sarcastic attitude that could only be described as condescending. It was Hazama of the NOL's Intelligence Department.

No one should have been there just now. Tsubaki had been the only one there since Hakumen disappeared, and there were no nearby objects she could have used to hide behind.

Where did he appear from, and why was he here? Stretching his lanky legs out like a shadow at dusk, Hazama smiled, holding out both his palms toward her, as if in praise or mockery.

"You really are an unlucky person. Major Jin Kisaragi and Second Lieutenant Noel Vermillion are very close to you, aren't they? And now you've been ordered to assassinate them. Isn't that a cruel story?"

"Captain Hazama. If you say anything more, I will have to report it as an act of treason."

His words, which had no hint of sympathy, were so transparently false. Her elated feelings from a moment ago had vanished, and Tsubaki frowned in disgust.

"Oh, my, my. I apologize. But... you just looked so pitiful." As if to apologize, Hazama lightly bowed, pressing a hand to his chest. His choice of words sounded like he was teasing her, and his fawning voice made Tsubaki sick to her stomach.

"With all due respect, I don't understand what you're saying, Captain."

"But isn't it true? Originally, you weren't supposed to be burdened with such a dirty job."

"What do you mean?" Tsubaki asked again. She had no idea what Hazama was trying to say. What did this man know? And what was so... enjoyable to him?

"Oh, that's right. You still don't know, do you?" With a smile that looked like it would rip his mouth, Hazama looked at her from the shadow of his hat, as if whispering a secret. "Do you want to know? What you were really supposed to become... The truth."

When he asked, Tsubaki found herself unconsciously gulping. She never wanted to talk to this man for long. But for some reason, she couldn't stop herself from listening to his words.

Feeling as if she was being lured in, Tsubaki remained silent. That was nothing less than a request to hear more. Eventually, Hazama began to speak, still smiling. All his words were hard to believe and accept. But just like water soaking into cotton, they quickly filled every gap in Tsubaki's heart.

3

January 4, 2200 - 11:18

The sky was very clear.

No matter how saturated with seithr the modern world was, most of it was concentrated near the surface. In the upper layer areas of the Hierarchical City, which were close to the top of the high mountains, the sky was not obscured by seithr and spread out in a beautiful blue color.

The clouds were white, long, and drifted in the wind. In the various gardens, big and small, built throughout the city, the planted trees and grasses swayed in the gentle breeze, adding color to the peaceful scene.

In a little while, the sun would reach the top of the sky, and the hands of the clock would both point up.

It was in this late morning hour that Noel had finally arrived at the upper tier of Kagutsuchi.

From the layer below, she had climbed the emergency stairs that were usually not in use. The area right above was an exclusive area for the NOL, so she quickly passed through and was now resting her tired, heavy legs, sitting in the shade of a tree in the corner of a park between the city and the building.

"Ouch..." She took off her boots and massaged her strained legs.

Since leaving Litchi's clinic in Orient Town last night, she had been moving all night with hardly any rest. She hadn't gotten enough sleep, let alone enough food. Even though she was used to physical activity, it was still unbearable.

But even so, the reason Noel had hurried to the upper layer was so she wouldn't be late for her appointment with Makoto. Makoto was moving for her now. If she hesitated, Makoto would also be in danger.

"But... I might be a little too early."

As she put her boots back on and freed her other foot, Noel's eyes lifted to the other side of the lush trees and the magnificent buildings typical of the upper tier.

From here, she could see the NOL branch office standing exceptionally tall. If she went straight there now, she would arrive several hours before her appointment with Makoto. But she didn't want to loiter around the branch office.

(Maybe I should hide somewhere first.)

Recalling the map of Kagutsuchi she had memorized when she came to the Hierarchical City a few days ago, Noel finished massaging her foot and put her other boot back on.

She decided to head toward the branch office while looking for a place where she wouldn't be seen and could secure an escape route. With that thought, she stood up and turned toward her path.

Suddenly, a person was standing there.

"Huh!??"

There was no sign of them. Noel jumped in surprise and sharply inhaled.

The person standing there was completely covered in a white cloak. Their face was hidden by a mask with an eyeball-like pattern, and their bizarre appearance was made even more strange by the peaceful backdrop of a blue sky and green trees.

It was difficult to identify them from their hidden body and face, but Noel knew who it was without them having to remove their mask.

A white cloak and an eyeball-like mask. That eerie outfit was a uniform.

It was for those who had to take on special missions without their faces being known. Those who took on the job of "assassination." It was the Zero Squadron, the "Wings of Justice" of the Novus Orbis Librarium.

There was only one person she could think of.

"Tsubaki?" Noel asked with a trace of fear, clenching her hands in front of her chest.

Although she knew about them from documents, this was her first time confronting an actual Wing of Justice. Their strange appearance and ominous aura made her feel like her feet were frozen in place.

As if to respond to Noel's voice, an arm in a white uniform reached out from under the white cloak and grabbed the mask. Just as Noel had expected, the mask was quietly removed to reveal the face of her best friend, whom she hadn't seen in a while.

"Tsubaki!"

Unable to hold back, Noel leaned forward and took a step.

But she couldn't rush forward any further. She suddenly remembered what Makoto had told her. Tsubaki's mission was assassination.

Specifically, of Jin Kisaragi and herself... Noel Vermillion.

In that case, she naturally understood why Tsubaki was here.

"Noel." Tsubaki's voice called out in a whisper. It was a heavy, sunken voice that Noel had never heard before.

The sky-blue eyes that stared at her no longer held any of the familiar kindness. Instead, there was a terribly sad and hurt look. Her expression was emotionless, but visible with an overflowing grief that couldn't be contained.

Tsubaki stared at Noel and said in a voice that was much harder and colder than before, "Lieutenant Noel Vermillion. An assassination order has been issued for you."

Noel shivered at the chill that ran down her spine.

She knew. She had tried to remind herself and be aware of why Tsubaki had come to Kagutsuchi, telling herself over and over on her way to the upper layer. But when she actually heard it directly from her best friend... she felt a chill run down her spine.

"Tsubaki, no. Please, listen to me!" Noel pleaded, her voice choked.

The distance between her and Tsubaki was too great for them to be best friends who could talk about anything. Tsubaki quietly answered from a distance not meant for talking, but for crossing blades.

"Of course I will. If what you're saying is no, then that means you have no intention of rebelling, right? So the information that you helped the wanted criminal Ragna the Bloodedge and let him escape is also a lie?" Tsubaki sternly questioned her with the calmness of a still body of water.

Noel was reflexively flustered. She hesitated, but she couldn't lie in front of Tsubaki. Noel shook her head slightly.

"That's... But Ragna-san helped me, too. So...!"

"So you helped him." Another dark emotion appeared on Tsubaki's expressionless face. It was disappointment toward Noel. "Aiding and abetting a wanted criminal designated by the NOL is a clear violation of regulations."

"But Tsubaki, that man..."

"Noel!" Tsubaki's voice interrupted her, as if to scold her. Her abrupt tone didn't allow for a rebuttal. Noel swallowed the words she was about to say. Her chest felt tight.

Although Tsubaki didn't show her emotions, a deep furrow was etched between her brows, as if in anguish. She didn't want to accept Noel's words. She *couldn't* accept them. That kind of rejection was apparent.

Noel sensed that it was meaningless to try and explain herself right now. Her words weren't reaching Tsubaki. It was shocking and sad.

"You understand, don't you? I'm not doing this because I want to. I still think of you as my best friend."

With her brows furrowed in anguish, Tsubaki shook her head as if to shake off her feelings and hesitation. She gazed sternly at Noel.

At Noel's sad expression, Tsubaki also felt a tightness in her chest. However, it wasn't out of sadness. It was because of another emotion that had entangled and immobilized her.

"But this is an imperial order. I am not allowed to refuse it. I am not allowed to ignore it or defy it." Saying that, Tsubaki gripped the chest of her cloak tightly. She ripped it off as if to tear it apart and threw it behind her.

What she wore underneath wasn't the uniform of an NOL soldier. It was the Sealed Armament: Izayoi, a white outfit with a solemn and archaic feel.

Her torso, neck, and feet were wrapped in the loose-fitting clothes, and her fingertips and toes were protected by gloves and boots. The same white hat was adorned with spread wings and a strange eyeball-like decoration.

In Tsubaki's outstretched hands, as if she were summoning them, a magnificent quill pen and a book appeared. The pen was a sword, and the book was a shield.

She seamlessly took a combat stance. The quill part of the pen had become a thin, red-streaked blade, and its tip was pointed at Noel.

"I will issue a single warning. Lieutenant Noel Vermillion, disarm yourself and surrender immediately. Otherwise, I will use force to eliminate you."

"Wait, Tsubaki..."

"Answer me!"

Stronger and sharper than the tip of her sword, Tsubaki stubbornly rejected Noel.
Feeling frustrated, Noel bit her lip. This wasn't what she wanted to talk to Tsubaki about. Holding back her bitter frustration, Noel answered Tsubaki.

"I... made a promise to Makoto. So I can't go with you right now. I can't let what Makoto is doing for me go to waste."

In a corner of her heart, she had thought Tsubaki would understand. When Tsubaki lowered her gaze and the sword-pen in her hand, Noel let out a sigh of relief. But when she raised them again, Tsubaki's eyes were stern and betrayed Noel's expectations.

"The white wing is the proof of purity, and the black wing is the festival of original sin. We are the agents of God, who judge sin and enforce its form." In a clear voice, Tsubaki recited the words used when the Wing of Justice executed a mission. In other words, a death sentence. "I am the Wing of Justice! Noel Vermillion, I will carry out your punishment!"

After saying that, Tsubaki pulled the pen back with all her might and, at the same time, dashed forward. Holding up her shield, she went to Noel and quickly swung her sword in an arc.

"Ah!" Jumping back with a gasp, Noel’s reaction was a moment too fast, and Tsubaki's first attack only grazed the bangs of Noel's hair, who was slow to escape. She then took another jump back and braced herself.

"Bolverk!"

In response to Noel's call, a small magic circle appeared at her outstretched fingertip. From it, she drew out two things, one for each hand. They were Noel's favorite weapons, a pair of guns. But they weren't just any guns. They were Arcus Diabolus: Bolverk, a phenomenon weapon said to have been used during the Dark War era.

They had appeared suddenly in front of Noel when she was first adopted by the Vermillion family, and for several years since that fateful encounter, they had always been with her on the front lines.

Noel crossing the two guns in front of her face was almost simultaneous with Tsubaki thrusting her sword. Between Noel and Tsubaki, the guns and sword collided, scattering a momentary flash of sparks.

"Ugh! Tsubaki, please stop! Why...?" Noel couldn't help but say as she pushed away from Tsubaki’s sword.

Catching the retreating Noel in her sky-blue eyes, Tsubaki braced herself again without any pretense of sheathing her sword and asked in a harsh tone.

"Why? That's what I want to ask you. Why, Noel? Why are you here? Why am I not you?"

"T-Tsubaki?"

Noel was confused and didn't understand the question, and Tsubaki's expression grew even more pained.

"Why... why wasn't it me!?"

As if struggling to hold something back, yet being pushed forward by something she couldn't control, Tsubaki choked out the words and ran forward. Closing the distance with a diving leap, she thrust the sword in her hand.

The sword did not reach Noel. But a white light extended from the sword, chasing Noel like a spear.

Noel instantly caught the light with both hands using Bolverk. The attack was colorful, but its load was heavy.

When the sword swung down to follow the light, striking Noel's guns again with force, Noel and Tsubaki looked each other in the eyes, locked together with Bolverk and Izayoi.

Noel felt her eyes welling up with tears.

As she gripped her sword with gritted teeth, Tsubaki's expression was extremely pained. Her sky-blue eyes were terribly hurt, and it looked as if she was desperately, desperately struggling to escape from a mire.

An overwhelming sadness rose in Noel's chest.

"I... I heard. I knew. I saw it..." Running down the park path with both feet, gripping her sword's sharp blade with both hands, Tsubaki spoke as if she could no longer hold back. "You weren't supposed to exist here. Originally...!"

Izayoi's sword trembled as it clashed with Bolverk, and Tsubaki's voice trembled as well. Her words deeply pierced Noel.

"Originally, I was supposed to be next to Brother Jin!"

They pierced her deeply.

This was the story Tsubaki had heard from Hazama.

It was like a silly fairy tale read to a child, or perhaps the ravings of a drunkard who had lost his reason.

According to the mysterious man from the Intelligence Department, there were countless worlds.

For example, in one world, event A happens, but in another, it doesn't. In this way, worlds paint different events in countless patterns, for every possible possibility.

However, there were almost no fundamental differences between each world. In every world, Tsubaki was born as the daughter of the Yayoi family and enrolled in the NOL's Military Academy. She met the beastkin Makoto Nanaya, and they became best friends, and then...

"After graduating from the Military Academy, you were assigned to the 4th Thaumaturgist Squadron as you wished, and became the secretary to Major Jin Kisaragi."

Sometimes with grand gestures, and sometimes leisurely walking around Tsubaki, Hazama spoke in a sonorous voice, as if reading a play script.

The place, on the outskirts of the upper layer and at the border with the NOL's jurisdiction, had become like a stage for Hazama.

Tsubaki was the only audience member. At first, she closed her ears to what she thought was a ridiculous tall tale, but before she knew it, she was caught in his verbal chains and couldn't move an inch.

"I... was... Major Jin Kisaragi's... secretary?"

Hazama leaned in close to Tsubaki, who couldn't keep up with what he was saying, and nodded with a whisper.

"Yes, that's right. But... oh my, oh my, isn't that strange? Then why aren't you Major Kisaragi's secretary? Everything is the same, from the you in other worlds to the you right here, so what could have possibly changed your destiny?"

The answer is simple, he said. The mouth with a cynical smile spoke.

"The truth is, it's because a person exists who wasn't supposed to be here. You already know who that is, don't you?"

Tsubaki looked down as if to escape, but Hazama would no longer allow her to close her ears. Even if he did, Tsubaki wouldn't have closed her ears. Because she already knew. Even before the unpleasant voice whispered it.

Nevertheless, and precisely because of that, Hazama spoke the words.

"It's Noel Vermillion."

When she heard it, she was so surprised she couldn't breathe. Not at the name whispered in her ear, but at herself for feeling clear resentment.

The dark emotion was immediately followed by self-loathing. That's why she was still calm at that moment, Tsubaki would later think.

Frowning, Tsubaki tried to hold back the urge to hysterically scream, "Stop messing around!" and did her utmost to remain calm as a soldier.

"But... Captain. Even if everything you say is true, doesn't that just mean that Noel... that Lieutenant Vermillion was destined to survive? I was destined to join the Zero Squadron. That's all there is to it..."

"My, my, how kind of you to say that. But do you really believe that?"

"Are you... trying to insult me!?" Unable to bear his teasing, feigned voice, Tsubaki turned back to Hazama as if to shake him off. What was waiting for her was a sharp glare. Golden, cold, reptilian-like eyes that should have been hidden in the shadow of his hat.

Adjusting his hat with his hand, Hazama smiled.

"Not at all. I apologize if I offended you. But, you see, Lieutenant Tsubaki Yayoi..."

"Don't listen." She thought. But Tsubaki didn't move. Holding her breath, glaring fiercely at Hazama... she waited for him to continue.

"You were robbed by Noel Vermillion. Robbed of the place you were supposed to have without doing anything, the form you were supposed to have. You were pushed out of your absolute position, which no one else could have taken, and which wouldn't have wavered as long as Noel Vermillion didn't exist. Just... like this."

Hazama suddenly reached out to Tsubaki, who was facing him at close range, and lightly pushed her. It wasn't a big impact. Just the force of a playful shove. But Tsubaki staggered and took a step back.

Tsubaki couldn't take her eyes off the spot where she'd been standing just a moment ago.

If the girl named Noel didn't exist...

If she hadn't enrolled in the Military Academy...

These hypotheses flickered through Tsubaki's mind even though she didn't want to think about them.

"Well, if you still can't believe it, shall I show you? With the power of Izayoi, you should be able to see it. Your destiny... the one you were supposed to have."

Hazama's voice and a non-existent scene slipped into Tsubaki's dazed consciousness.

It was the familiar sight of the NOL's headquarters. White, soft sunlight poured into the long corridor, and Tsubaki was walking in a curtain of faint light. Her destination was nearby, in front of a door she was used to.

A light knock was answered by a short voice. Tsubaki entered with courtesy and took a few steps, straightening her back. In her line of sight, the room's owner, with a large window behind him, was writing with a pen at his desk. He looked up, saw Tsubaki, and looked a little surprised.

Smiling slightly at his expression, Tsubaki said, "I have been appointed as the secretary to the 4th Thaumaturgist Squadron Commander, Major Jin Kisaragi. Major, I look forward to working with you."

After a moment... Jin gave a bitter smile. Softly and gently.

"I heard a secretary was coming, but I never thought it would be you. ...It's a pleasure, Tsubaki."

As if the sweet light melted away, Tsubaki woke up from her brief daydream. The scenery that returned was that of Kagutsuchi, but her clothes were not the blue uniform from her dream, but the white Izayoi.

Clutching her forehead in discomfort at the vision that had forcefully passed through her consciousness, Tsubaki lowered her gaze and asked, "Why... why did you... tell me that...?"

"There's no deep meaning behind it. It's just that you looked so pitiful. You, who call the person who took everything from you your best friend... Don't you think?"

Saying that, Hazama walked away as if nothing had happened.

Tsubaki just stood there.

There was a person she loved. There was a dream she wished for. There was a future she longed for. All of them were so close, in a place she could almost reach out and touch, but she always felt too embarrassed and apologetic.

Someday, she thought, when she became a respectable woman worthy of standing next to that person. When she became an adult who wasn't ashamed to be by his side. Then... then…

Her young, innocent heart was surely waiting for the day that wish would come true. She had no doubts. Everyone around her had promised her the future she had envisioned. The rest was up to the girl's will. All she had to do was have a little courage and say she wanted to be by his side. So why? Why was she wearing a white uniform now? Why-

"Why, I- Agh!"

Tsubaki forcefully pushed back the guns she was locked with and swung her sword overhead, as if cutting into the open space. The red blade tore through the air, unfolding like a bellows. The strike, which had a flexible trajectory, sliced at Noel as if caressing her.

"Tch!"

Izayoi’s blade grazed the large barrel of the Bolverk that was being used as a shield, as if shaving it. Immediately after, an unpleasant premonition ran through her neck, and Noel put her hands on the ground and flipped her body over.

The sword, shaped like a whip, dove into the ground from under Tsubaki's feet, splitting the ground where Noel had been standing and thrusting upward. Noel leaped into the air, and the tip of the sword grazed her leg, scattering a faint red shadow as the pain ran through her.

"Ku..." A small sound escaped her, and Noel took another jump back. She landed in a low crouch and quickly looked up. "Tsubaki..."

There was no will to fight in Noel's eyes. After hearing a story like that, she had no reason to feel the will to fight.

The story of the worlds, the story of Tsubaki's place, and the story of what Noel's existence meant.

The story Tsubaki told was terribly fragmented and emotional, and by no means coherent. But Noel had understood what kind of story it was, what kind of shock it contained, and what kind of feelings Tsubaki had poured into it.

If the current world was distorted as Hazama had told Tsubaki, and that distortion was Noel, then surely the beginning was that day.

The massive explosion accident at Ibukido that occurred during the Ikaruga Civil War.

If Noel hadn't been rescued that day, or if she had been caught in the accident and lost her life, she never would've entered the NOL's Military Academy or met Tsubaki and Makoto. Noel never would’ve become the secretary to the 4th Squadron Commander.

A chill and goosebumps ran through her, as if something cold was flowing down her skin.

"What's wrong, Noel? Don't you intend to fight?"

Returning the bellow-shaped sword to its original feather shape, Tsubaki pointed the red tip at Noel.

Noel shook her head vigorously.

"I can't fight you, Tsubaki! And besides, I... You...!"

Even though she squeezed the words out, she didn't know what to say next, and Noel lowered her gaze.

Her mind was in a state of confusion. But one thing she understood was that her existence had made Tsubaki very sad and hurt.

Would Tsubaki have been happy if she hadn't existed? She must have been.

At the very least, she wouldn't have been given a mission like assassinating Jin. She wouldn't have received such a cruel order to harm the person she loved.

"It's all... my fault, isn't it? I'm sorry... I'm so sorry, Tsubaki."

There was no way to confirm whether Hazama's story was true. But the truth didn't matter.

Tsubaki had given Noel a future. She had given a wonderful time to Noel, who had been empty without any memories or a past. To think that she might have stolen the one future Tsubaki had wished for...

Tears were about to fall.

"Don't apologize..." Tsubaki's previously hostile voice trembled slightly.

Noel looked up again. With a pained expression, as if desperately holding back, Tsubaki didn't avert the tip of her sword from Noel.

"What am I supposed to do if you apologize? I don't want to fight you either. But you are a traitor to the NOL... I am a 'Wing of Justice' who came here to kill you!"

The right hand holds the blade of judgment, and the left hand holds the scales of truth. The Wing of Justice is the guardian of the order of the world ruled by the NOL.

Saying that as if to remind herself, Tsubaki shook her head and glared at Noel again with a pained, hostile gaze.

"If you have no intention of resisting, then be quietly purged! Lieutenant Vermillion!" Tsubaki dashed forward and leaped again. The sword unfolded like a bellows and extended to slice at Noel.

When Noel blocked it with her crossed gun barrels, Tsubaki's left hand followed up by swinging her shield. Light in the shape of a pure white wing overflowed from the shield, which had opened like a thick book, and accompanied by a powerful shock that was lighter than a strike but more intense, it blew Noel and her guns away.

"Ah!" Overwhelmed by the unexpected force, Noel tumbled on the hard pavement. The sound of footsteps came, and she knew she was being pursued. Noel immediately got up and pointed the two guns in her hands forward.

"Tsubaki, I'm sorry!" Saying this, she pulled the triggers at the same time, firing countless Ars Magus shots one after another.

Her target was the area around Tsubaki's feet. She shattered the neatly arranged stones of the pavement, making them fly up. She jumped over the improvised smokescreen that blurred her and Tsubaki’s vision and went behind her.

Exhaling sharply, she slid low to the ground and swept Tsubaki's feet.

When she staggered, Noel pointed her gun at her and fired an Ars Magus, suppressing its force as much as possible. Even so, when hit at close range, Tsubaki was lightly blown away and fell to the ground just like Noel before.

"Ugh!"

It shouldn't have been powerful enough to injure her. Still, Noel flinched at Tsubaki's voice, which was distorted by the impact. The moment her feet froze, Tsubaki sprang up, rushed in, and sliced horizontally. Then she used her shield to push up from below, again spreading white wings and pushing Noel away with a mysterious force.

As Tsubaki continued to pursue her, Noel flipped in the air and fired an Ars Magus at the ground, shattering it to stop Tsubaki, and then braced herself in her own range.

Her breath was unnecessarily ragged, choked by the guilt that welled up every time she moved. But Noel desperately hardened her expression and pointed her guns at her friend. She didn't want to fight Tsubaki. But Tsubaki was a Wing of Justice. She was here on a mission to do what that name implied.

Tsubaki had always been bad at violating rules and regulations. And she was also a person who would see her assigned tasks through to the very end. Tsubaki couldn't just abandon her mission, no matter what her emotions were.

It didn't matter if Noel cried to persuade her, told her the circumstances, if Tsubaki held resentment toward Noel, or took out her anger on her, Tsubaki's clumsy sense of responsibility would make her hold her sword, regardless of all that.

If that was the case, Noel had to fight.

She could turn and run. But then Tsubaki would have to chase Noel. She would be forced to run with her tangled emotions. In some cases, she might even reach Noel and Makoto's meeting place.

If that happened, she would be dragging Tsubaki into it. She would be putting even more pressure on Tsubaki, who was already carrying a painful mission and a twisted destiny.

(I can't cause Tsubaki any more trouble...)

So she had to fight and give Tsubaki a reason why she couldn't pursue Noel.

She had to.

"Yaah!" As if to shake off her own hesitation, Noel let out a battle cry and rushed forward, firing a long distance Ars Magus at the same time.

She wouldn't lose to Tsubaki or Makoto in terms of speed. She quickly closed the distance, stepped in, twisted her body, and brought her heel down from a high position.

Her first attack was a feint. Just as she had planned, she made Tsubaki stop by having her block with her shield, and then she struck her with her elbow, aiming for an open spot. Next, she twisted her gun into the space created by the impact and fired another Ars Magus.

Tsubaki grunted, but she braced her legs to prevent herself from falling. She immediately switched to an offensive posture. She held her shield forward and her sword back, then stepped in and thrusted. The sharp thrust grazed Noel's arm as she dodged it.

She then crouched down and kicked up from below, aiming for her jaw. As she got up, she switched her sword to a bellows and sliced at her like a whip.

Noel desperately raised Bolverk to block and dodged the sword’s unpredictable, wide swing.

But she had only focused on the sword. Light suddenly overflowed from the shield that was thrust in front of her, and the wing-shaped light blew her away with a mysterious force.

For a moment, her vision went dark. She’d hit her head when she fell. She shook her head lightly to regain consciousness and got up. Just then.

"Be prepared!" Tsubaki had leaped high into the air and now descended, clad in wings of light. She was like an angel. Pure, straightforward, serious, and immaculate.

Noel had admired Tsubaki, who could do anything. When they were together, she felt like she was illuminated by Tsubaki's nobility.

"Tsubaki... I'm sorry!" Noel raised the barrels of Bolverk. She aimed at the girl clad in light and fired both guns one after another.

It was a veritable barrage. The gunshots continued as if she had brought out a machine gun, and the Ars Magus, which rained down from below, extinguished Tsubaki's wings and struck her body.

"Aaaah!"

Pushed back by the rain of Ars Magus, Tsubaki fell to the ground. She didn't have the time to break her fall. The sword left her hand, bounced on the ground, turned into several feathers, and vanished. Before Tsubaki could summon her sword back into her hand...

"Don't move." Noel ran over, pointing the silver barrel of her gun at the face of the fallen Tsubaki.

It was as if time, which had been accelerating at a dizzying speed, had come to a complete stop.

Tsubaki was on the ground, her hands positioned to get up, and Noel was pointing a gun at her to stop her from moving. On the shattered pavement, neither of them looked the other in the eye, and their shoulders rose and fell with rough, ragged breaths.

Noel was the one breathing heavily. Noel was the one who looked cornered and had a pained look on her face.

"Please... don't move, Tsubaki." Noel's words were more of a plea than a threat. In her heart, she was praying. She didn't want to shoot her anymore.

The Ars Magus she'd fired at Tsubaki all had their power suppressed as much as possible. They had an impact, but they didn't have the power to tear flesh or break bones. Still, it would hurt if they hit.

"Noel..." Tsubaki muttered in a small voice. Slowly, as if to trace Noel's figure, she looked up. It was then that her gaze finally met Noel's. "I'm hopeless... aren't I? I even brought out the secret weapon of the Yayoi family... but in the end, I couldn't beat you."

Tsubaki's cheek was a little scraped. It was slightly dirty from the impact, and her long hair, which had been held down by her hat, was also disheveled. But strangely enough, the white uniform she wore wasn't dirty at all.

What a strange outfit and weapon. Noel's stern expression turned into one of confusion, and she asked Tsubaki, "The secret weapon... is that uniform?"

"That's right. It's called the Izayoi. I'm just an average fighter, so I need this for my missions."

Jin was an excellent swordsman who had achieved brilliant military exploits during the Ikaruga Civil War, and Noel had scored the highest ever on the Ars Magus aptitude test upon entering the Military Academy. Tsubaki needed a special power to oppose them with force and to face the phenomenon weapons they possessed.

Tsubaki put her hands on the ground again and pulled herself up. However, she only raised her upper body and didn't get up. She sat on the cold pavement and lowered her gaze, looking away from Noel.

"I was jealous of you." Tsubaki said weakly, as if letting the words fall. "You’re far more talented than you think you are. I can't catch up, no matter how hard I try."

"That's not true! I've always admired you, Tsubaki! You can do anything, and you're so kind. I've wondered so many times how great it would be if I could be like you!"

Tsubaki's sad confession was so unexpected that Noel doubted her ears. The intense emotions from a moment ago were no longer there. Like a flower wilting open, like a shining light fading and vanishing, Tsubaki hung her head weakly.

Tsubaki no longer had any hostility. Noel let go of Bolverk, released the phenomenon weapon summon, and knelt on the spot.

Tsubaki looked fragile. So fragile that she looked like she might disappear at any moment.

"Thanks to you, I've met so many people, Tsubaki. I love you and Makoto so much."

"Noel. That's enough. I don't have the right to be treated kindly by you."

"The right..."

She shouldn't need a right to it. Noel impulsively grabbed Tsubaki's shoulders with both hands.

"I've always thought of you, Tsubaki-"

"Just go." Tsubaki cut off Noel in a cold, dismissive tone before she could continue with, "as my best friend."

"Tsubaki!"

In response to Noel asking "Why," Tsubaki looked down, shaking her head as if to further escape from Noel. It was as if she were scolding a disobedient child.

"I am a Wing of Justice. You are a traitor. As long as you're here, I have to kill you."

That was an unchangeable fact. They were standing on different ground.

Still looking down, Tsubaki brushed off Noel's hands that were on her shoulders.

"Go. That was your intention, wasn't it? Then hurry. I'll only let you go once. The next time we meet, Noel, I'll..."

Kill you. She had to kill her.

"I..." With her hand pushed away, Noel floated aimlessly and began to speak in a trembling voice. But she couldn't remember what she was going to say.

"Go!" Scolded by Tsubaki's strained voice, Noel stood up. Her feet staggered as she took a step back.

"I shouldn't be here." She thought. Being here would only make Tsubaki suffer more. It would hurt her and corner her. So Noel turned around, desperately swallowing the feeling of tears welling up in her throat.

"I'm sorry!"

No clever words came out. Leaving those words behind, which she had said because she couldn't bear it anymore, Noel started to run.

She left the park's path, crossed a thicket, went through the trees beyond, climbed a low wall, and went around to the back of the city. She found a darker place and slipped into a narrow alley with little foot traffic.

Her whole body ached. Her chest was especially painful and tight. She wanted to cry, to hold Tsubaki in her arms like when she had reunited with Makoto in Kagutsuchi.

But that couldn't happen.

Right now, she just had to run, and run. She had to get away from Tsubaki and go to a place where she couldn't be seen.

The sound of Noel's running footsteps grew faint.

Her footsteps were always so light.

She was a shy, quiet, and timid girl who wasn't good with strangers. But she was also a girl full of talent, sometimes showing surprising determination and possessing a wonderful aptitude for Ars Magus.

She loved being with Noel. She was happy when Noel relied on her. The time the three of them- Noel, Makoto, and herself -spent together was Tsubaki's treasure.

But...

"Why..."

Why did it have to turn out like this?

Even after Noel was gone, Tsubaki couldn't get up, and she cried as her shoulders shook.

When she was ordered to assassinate Noel and Jin, she truly believed that there was no way those two were traitors. And she still did. She didn't believe that Noel, of all people, would betray the NOL without any reason or circumstances.

She had planned to ask about the situation. And then, together with Noel, they would think about what to do. She thought she might even be able to solve the problem together with Jin. That's what she had thought when she landed in Kagutsuchi.

She clenched her hands, which were on the ground, trembling. Tears dripped uncontrollably from the corners of her eyes, making stains on the pavement.

"I'm sorry... Noel..."

She had felt jealous of her. She had felt resentful. She had given in to those ugly emotions and was carried away. And the result was this. What a hollow scene.

She had done a terrible thing. She had *said* terrible things.

Noel was the way she was, so she would surely try to forgive her. But they would probably never go back to being irreplaceable best friends again.

Because she had stood in front of her best friend as an enemy, and she had done it of her own accord.

(I... have nothing left.)

The dreams and aspirations she had seriously held during her student days were lost long ago.

Her precious best friend had just let go of her. Her other best friend, Makoto, would probably be appalled and abandon her.

The same went for Jin. He would surely be disappointed if he saw her pitiful state.

(But that's fine.)

While her shoulders trembled with uncontrollable sobs, Tsubaki quietly called out Jin's name.

(It's okay if he's disappointed. It's okay if he hates me. It's fine in the end...)

Tsubaki wandered aimlessly, dragging her unsteady feet. She repeatedly wiped her tears with her hard gloves, but they wouldn't stop, and they overflowed again, dripping down.

Her wet eyes were blurry and hazy.

The users of Izayoi lost their light in exchange for power. Soon, Tsubaki would lose her light as well.

If that was the case, at least the last light her eyes beheld would be the person she had always wanted to see.

As if pulled by her thoughts, Tsubaki began walking on unsteady feet. Her tears finally stopped, but her eyes, which she had rubbed with her gloves, stung.

Which direction was the NOL in? Tsubaki could no longer see most of the scenery of the lush park.

Chapter 3: Continuum Shift - Probabilistic Event

1

January 4, 2200 - 12:04

Ragna kicked open the door he had arrived at after going through a small, barely lit entrance and climbing a long, cold ladder for one entire layer. A gust of outside air rushed in. The sudden, stinging wind momentarily took his breath away, and he went outside, lightly coughing.

He roughly brushed his hair, which had been messily ruffled by that short moment, and looked around.

He was already in the upper layer of Kagutsuchi. There weren't any more layers above, and the unobstructed sunlight was blinding. For Ragna, after walking through the dark interior for hours, it was dazzling.

"Tch... where is this?"

His hazy vision was filled with a deserted, inorganic space. It seemed to be the back of some facility managed by the NOL, but since no one was there, he couldn't tell if it was no longer in use or if people had left.

Ragna suddenly remembered when he had entered the NOL's Kagutsuchi branch a few days ago. At that time, the barrier that should've been there was deactivated, and the many soldiers who should've been there had suddenly disappeared.

Was this place also deserted like the branch office? Maybe it had been locked down after the news of the branch office attack.

Whatever the reason, being deserted was convenient. Ragna began walking with a somewhat lighter feeling.

As he walked, he looked up and saw the NOL branch was already visible.

That was his destination. Ragna's eyes narrowed, and he grimaced.

He was looking for Yuuki Terumi, or the man from the NOL named Hazama. He wasn't sure if they were at the branch office, but he figured he could at least get some information about them even if they weren't.

But now that he had climbed all the way up and could see the branch office with his own eyes, Ragna strongly felt that the man was there.

He couldn't explain it logically, but he had a very bad feeling.

A sense of ominousness and unrest. Such things were tickling Ragna's warning signals. Especially toward the top of the branch. A sense of highway-like tension made Ragna's right arm ache. There was no doubt that something was wrong in that area.

Ragna lowered his gaze to his right arm.

It was currently hidden by his clothes and glove, but this arm, stained an ominous black, was created with the Azure Grimoire. It wasn't Ragna's own arm. But when he clenched it, he could feel its texture, temperature, and softness.

For some reason, as if picking up a random question out of boredom, he wondered: What was the base material made of?

"Tch."

Before he could even think about it, Ragna clicked his tongue in annoyance and shook off the question that came to his mind.

(Now's not the time for that. Don't think about stupid things!)

He suppressed the words that were about to come out and scolded himself internally. He had finally forgotten about it, so how long was he going to drag this feeling around? He was getting annoyed with himself.

"I need to hurry to the branch and beat the shit out of him..."

Otherwise, the mess in the back of his mind would never go away, and he'd continue to feel sick.

He ran his fingers through his hair and ruffled it, then hurried his steps. He went up a simple staircase made of crude steel beams, which was rare for the elegant upper layer, with enough force that it seemed like he would break it.

The scenery became higher, and since he had entered deeper into the facility's grounds, the eeriness of the deserted area stood out.

In the middle of that scenery, an out-of-place figure stood still, like a forgotten doll.

Ragna gasped and stopped. For a moment, he doubted his eyes.

The person standing there was Lambda. Lambda No. 11. The Prime Field that had broken into the restaurant in Orient Town yesterday and went on a rampage. The artificial girl with the number 11 on her chest.

However, she didn't have the headgear and several other parts from that time, but was wearing a loose cape over a black bodysuit, and her face was bare. Dull golden hair in a slightly messy texture hung over her white cheek and forehead, and deep in her long bangs, her red eyes were staring blankly into the void.

She really did look similar.

The same face.

Something bitter spread in the back of Ragna's throat.

The image of the younger sister he had lost in childhood flickered in his mind. The same face as his sister, Saya, was suddenly here without context, as if it belonged. He didn't know how he was supposed to feel about this.

"Hey."

Was it a few seconds, or maybe ten? He hesitated for a short time, but in the end, Ragna called out to her while keeping a slight distance.

Ragna's voice carried well. It seemed to have reached Lambda's ears even without him consciously raising it, and she turned around with a clumsy motion, seemingly unbothered by her bangs or long braid swaying in the wind.

Ragna immediately braced himself. She might suddenly attack him again, just like before.

But after waiting a few seconds, the 11th one just stayed where she was, having turned around, and only blinked once with a blank expression.

"Tch."

Seeing no change in the situation, Ragna frowned and clicked his tongue. She was throwing him off his game. If she would at least start crying when their eyes met, like some other people he knew, he would know how to react.

"Ah, hey. You're Lambda, right?"

Lambda didn't show any particular reaction to Ragna's annoyed tone. She was silent for a while, and then:

"11th Boundary Interface Prime Field Device... No. 11," she replied in an emotionless, detached voice.

Ragna's broad shoulders fell with a sigh.

"What the hell?" He grumbled.

If this was some kind of trick or trap, he wished it would look like one. She appeared so defenseless and nonchalant, as if she were completely harmless. He couldn't figure out a good way to deal with her, but he also couldn't ignore her.

"What are you doing here? Are you setting a trap?"

Lambda didn't answer immediately. She seemed to be thinking about the meaning of the question.

"Objective... unknown." She blinked twice, and the answer that came back made Ragna sigh again.

"Unknown? What the hell does that mean?"

Since when did Kagutsuchi become a place where Prime Fields with unknown objectives roamed around?

Ragna put a hand to his forehead as if he had a headache and walked over to Lambda. It was pointless to keep his distance out of caution.

"What's Kokonoe doing? Aren't you connected by communication?"

"Communication impossible. Cause: unable to specify..."

"Are you serious? What is she doing?"

He was amazed at the poor management. He thought she would always give some arrogant, incomprehensible lecture, but now she'd just throw a Prime Field somewhere and lose contact with it?

"No objective, no guardian. That means... are you lost?" Ragna snorted in exasperation and grumbled.

She gave off the impression of a lost dog or something that had been separated from its owner, probably because her dull reactions and expressionlessness made it hard to communicate with her.

Even now, with her usual expressionless face, Lambda looked up at Ragna and tilted her head.

"Lost..."

"Huh? Yeah, lost. I'm sure Kokonoe knows you're gone and will come to pick you up soon. Just stay put there until then."

He didn't want to get involved in any more unnecessary things. Ragna spoke dismissively and awkwardly looked away.

But in his peripheral vision, Lambda suddenly crouched down on the spot.

"Acknowledged."

She hugged her knees like a child, as if taking a standby position, and stared up at the sky blankly.

Ragna was speechless at her unexpected reaction. There was no reason for her to obey his instructions. So why did she accept and carry it out so easily?

(I don't get it...)

Ragna scratched his head.

He just couldn't understand this Prime Field, Lambda. It was as if she lacked any will, any thought about what to do or what she wanted.

After thinking that, Ragna realized his own foolishness.

(Will or not, this thing is a creation in the first place.)

She was a moving doll created by someone and then modified or adjusted by Kokonoe. There was no point in worrying about whether or not she had a will.

(Besides, I wasn't even worrying.)

While complaining to himself, Ragna only moved his eyes to look down at the girl next to him.

The wind passed through here well. A gust of wind from beyond the fence blew and gently lifted Lambda's long bangs.

Her texture didn't look like a creation. But the way she just stared at the sky without a care, even when the tips of her hair touched her eyes, made her seem unnaturally inorganic.

"The view's better if you go down those stairs over there. See ya." Speaking in a low, barely audible voice, Ragna strode past Lambda. He didn't look for Lambda's reaction. In fact, he tried not to be aware of her existence.

If he was aware, he would start thinking. He would start thinking about why he hadn't destroyed the Prime Field after discovering the 11th and 12th ones.

(Boundary Interface Prime Field Devices are dangerous... If even one remains, people will reach for the Boundary. We can't let things like that remain... right!?)

The logic he had used just a few days ago seemed so distant.

Just as he was about to swing his arm to punch the nearby wall in frustration-

"Shhh!"

A faint voice grazed his ears, followed by the metallic sound of swords clashing.

Ragna instinctively turned around and ran with the momentum.

The voice was a woman's voice. He could only think of Lambda. But why would a girl staring blankly at the sky and crouching make a sound like she was swinging a sword?

His uneasy premonition turned into understanding the moment he rounded the corner he had just passed.

Maybe it was because he said the view was better. Lambda had moved to the top of the stairs that Ragna had come up.

But she wasn't alone. The one she was with was a black, ominous, amorphous man... Arakune, whom he had seen in the sewers and the Kaka village.

Arakune's inhuman body, filled with seithr, trembled eerily, and a simple mask with only eyes and a mouth stuck to his face as a replacement. He had captured Lambda in his body.

"Ah... kah..."

Lambda's feet were hanging in the air, her neck being squeezed by a coiling, shadowy arm. He couldn't tell if she didn't have her weapons ready or if she couldn't summon them, but the headgear and the eight blades that unfolded from her back weren't there.

Even though her clothes were strange, she looked like a normal girl, but even in this situation, she was still expressionless, and only her mouth was gasping for breath.

"You...! You...!" Ragna subconsciously shouted and drew the sword from his waist as he ran. He swung it vertically and sliced the black object that was holding Lambda. It felt dull, and the strange elasticity, which was neither bone nor meat, felt disgusting.

Arakune, having been so engrossed in absorbing Lambda that he hadn't noticed Ragna's approach, shrieked and bent backward. In that moment, Ragna pushed Lambda's body, which had escaped his grasp, backward and rushed between them.

Lambda staggered, sat down as if she had fallen on her butt, and coughed dryly.

"Gegegegegegegegegegegegegege... It's so tasty, I can't eat it, it's too strong. I must... absorb... life. I must fill myself with the color of life, so why are you in my way...!"

"Where the hell did you come from, you bastard?!"

Arakune's hunched back trembled violently, and he ranted in a bizarre voice that sounded like grinding metal, while Ragna aimed a sharp gaze and the tip of his sword at him.

It was then that Arakune finally recognized Ragna's existence, and he abruptly stopped talking. He stuck his neck out and lifted his mask-like face. He stared at Ragna for a while with his hollow eyes. At his feet, strange creatures squirmed within his seithr body, swelling up in bizarre bumps.

"A... A... Azure, it's a man! I want the Azure, I want it... I want to eat the endless Azure and fill myself with it. I want to be immersed in the sea of eternal knowledge...!"

Arakune's body shook violently from the bottom up, and he shot out a bone-like organ from his chest, as if he were opening his ribs. He tried to capture Ragna with the spread-out bones and devour him like a carnivorous plant.

Ragna swatted away the approaching bony jaws with his sword. As he stepped forward to attack again, a part of Arakune, which should have been recoiling from the impact, quickly grew onto his feet.

Arakune pulled on him forcefully, making him lose his balance, and spat out a reddish-black mist right in front of Ragna's face.

"Ugh... *cough*." His vision became blurry and hazy. He shook off the mist and clenched his fist, punching the round mask in front of him. But just before his fist could land, a strange insect flew down from above Ragna and blocked his view.

It wasn't just one insect. Another came from his feet, and a moment later, another came from behind. As if tearing through space, one bizarre creature after another flew at him, clinging to him, and baring their ugly fangs to devour his flesh.

"Damn it, you're annoying!" He kicked away a large crawling insect, brushed away the things clinging to his arms, and swept away the new creatures coming at him with his sword.

Arakune, who had disappeared into the ground right in front of Ragna, appeared behind him the next moment.

"Tch!"

His movements were faster than when they fought in the sewers. Or rather, he felt a sense of persistence, a kind of obsession. With the desperate force of a hungry beast, he changed his entire body into a large jaw and tried to swallow Ragna, who had turned around.

But Ragna held his sword vertically, blocking the jaws made of bizarre, teeth-like bones just in time.

"Knock it off!"

He forcefully pushed Arakune back. He swung his sword in the space he had pried open and brought it down from a high position. The broadsword, infused with the power of the Azure Grimoire from his right arm, was clad in a dark, flickering flame.

"Gahgagagagagagaahh!"

Arakune let out a tremendous shriek that sounded like his eardrums were tearing as he was hit by the frontal attack. His black body trembled as if boiling, his seithr body convulsed with bizarre movements, and a moment later, he suddenly collapsed and was crushed on the spot.

Like a shadow sliding across the ground, Arakune scrambled to escape into a nearby drain, his empty mask floating dutifully.

The sound of something dragging like a bag of sand faded away as it was sucked in... And the scenery returned to normal, a deserted and silent area on the outskirts of the NOL.

"Are you okay?" Ragna asked with a grimace, catching his breath and looking behind him.

Lambda was still sitting on her butt, looking blankly at him as if she didn't understand the situation.

"Status, search... No damage, no system abnormality."

"So you're fine." Ragna couldn't help but smile, but he immediately retracted it, deliberately furrowing his brows as if to scold himself. "Geez, don't go causing so much trouble. What happened to the spirit you had when you were jumping at me?" He muttered sarcastically, gritting his teeth in frustration.

His body had moved on its own, and he'd helped her without thinking. He'd helped the Prime Field girl he'd said he should destroy.

This made it clear. It was shown to him too explicitly. He was confronted with a reality he couldn't look away from.

He couldn't destroy Lambda. He couldn't kill her.

The reason was simple. He pitied her.

She had no emotions or will and could only follow Kokonoe's orders, yet she looked at him with innocent, puppy-like eyes.

He found it pathetic to stab this girl with his sword, break her into pieces, and dispose of her. He felt a strong resistance to treating her as an inorganic object.

"Hm?" Ragna suddenly noticed that Lambda's posture had changed.

Lambda had gotten up, but she wasn't standing. She was sitting on her heels, intently staring at Ragna's feet.

"What are you lookin' at... Whoa!" Wondering what she was looking at, Ragna was startled and jumped back slightly.

Closer than he expected, in a spot where he might've stepped on it had he taken a step to the side, a disgusting creature laid on the ground.

It had a soft body with no limbs, and a mouth that was disproportionately large for its body. Protruding from its body were what looked like antennae, though he didn't know what they were used for.

Ragna immediately remembered what it was.

"Damn... you startled me. This thing's one of Arakune's bugs, isn't it?"

It was a technique to control the bizarre insects he had just fought. He was sure one of the ones that had jumped at him looked like this.

"Searching, searching, searching... match. Mollusca, Gastropoda, Tartar." Still sitting on her heels, Lambda was intently staring at the bug. The bug writhed clumsily, not moving forward or backward, but just squirming.

"Tartar? Is that its name?" It was a biological name he had never heard before. Lambda nodded slightly to Ragna's question. "From what I've heard, that guy, Arakune, keeps a ton of those bugs inside his body. This one must've fallen off and been left behind when we fought."

As he said that, Ragna put a hand behind his neck and grimaced.

Although it looked like a tiny, helpless bug, it came from inside Arakune. Arakune was what was left of a human who had gotten too close to the Boundary and lost his form. He didn't think it was a good idea to just leave a bug that parasitized a body that was a collection of seithr. He considered just stepping on it and crushing it, but that was very difficult when it was being so intently observed.

As if following Ragna's face, which he had turned away, Lambda looked up at him.

"Mollusca, Gastropoda, Tartar... lost?"

"Yeah, I guess you could say that." Ragna immediately regretted answering. If he put that label on it, it would be even harder to do what he had planned.

Just as he expected, Lambda seemed to be satisfied with the answer and turned back to the bug, which was still squirming. She gently reached out a hand to touch it, but then stopped her fingers in midair.

"Heart rate decreasing..."

"Heart rate?" Ragna's eyes naturally turned to the writhing bug. He looked closer and saw a strange liquid seeping out from under it. The color was an indescribable blend of purple and blue, so unnatural that it could only be the insect's bodily fluid.

"Is it hurt?"

It might have been one of the bugs that Ragna had sliced.

Lambda put her floating hand back on her knee, leaned down a little, and brought her face closer to the Tartar.

"Heart rate... decreasing." Her emotionless voice repeated the words indifferently. From those words, it was clear that Lambda was deeply concerned about the bug's life. As Ragna watched, the bug gradually weakened. He sighed heavily and crouched down next to Lambda.

"It's dying. But it's not because of the injury. The reason it's getting weaker is because it's too far away from its host, Arakune. Creatures like this can't live when they're separated from their host."

"Heart rate decreasing."

Her large, red eyes stared up at Ragna from up close. Her clear, beautiful eyes were just like a human's, and they were so meticulously crafted that no one would believe she was a creation if there were emotions like sadness or anxiety floating in them.

Even though she had no emotions, her gaze seemed to be pleading for something, and Ragna's breath caught in his throat, and he flinched. He ran a hand through his white hair and asked just in case.

"You're not asking me to save it, are you?"

To save a dying bug that had been baring its fangs and trying to bite him just a moment ago.

Lambda, still sitting on her knees, gazed earnestly at Ragna with unwavering sincerity, who gave her a bitter smile as if to say, "You've got to be kidding."

2

Ragna seemed to have wandered into a facility that managed the amount of seithr in Kagutsuchi. He only realized this after he'd torn a hole in a random fence and exited, finding himself in front of the building.

The area seemed to be a street with many NOL facilities in the upper layer. He also noticed several other impressive buildings that seemed to serve some important role.

Without much interest in them, Ragna chose a long, vertical building that happened to be nearby and boldly entered from the front.

It was the NOL's surveillance tower. This facility was used to monitor for any trouble or criminal activity in the area and to report the situation to the branch office in case of an emergency.

He opened the door, which had special reinforced glass, and found the inside to be eerily silent and deserted. Rather, the entire area, including the surveillance tower, was deserted, as if the humans had suddenly vanished.

There was no damage that would require evacuation, and the clean buildings were typically favored by the NOL. However, there were no soldiers or staff members.

It was as if only they had been extracted and sucked away somewhere.

"I don't know what happened, but it's convenient, so I'm not complaining."

The quiet, deserted street was incredibly eerie, but it was a great relief to be able to move around without worrying about being seen.

Heading up to the second floor of the tower, Ragna searched the room and found a first-aid kit. He nodded at Lambda, who was standing blankly by the entrance.

"Hey, come here. Sit down wherever... and put that down here."

"That" was the bizarre creature, Arakune's Tartar, that was weakly trembling on the plate that Lambda had made with her hands.

Lambda did as she was told and placed the Tartar on what looked like a dining table. She took a step back and sat down on a nearby chair. All the while, her red eyes continued to observe the tiny bug.

"Damn it, why am I even doing this?" Ragna grumbled once, sat down heavily on a chair, and took out what seemed to be the right things from the first-aid kit. He briefly wondered if it was okay to use human antiseptic on a creature that lived in seithr, but he had never heard of antiseptic being able to get rid of seithr.

He took out a sterilized gauze, soaked it with the antiseptic, disinfected the wound, and then wrapped a bandage around it loosely.

He had never treated a bug before. After finishing the makeshift first aid, he picked up the Tartar and moved it in front of Lambda.

"I'm used to these kinds of things, but I'm not an expert, so don't get your hopes up." He wondered to himself what kind of expertise would even be required for this situation. Lambda stared at Ragna, who was internally tilting his head, then at the Tartar, and then back at Ragna.

"Why?"

"Huh?"

"Mollusca Gastropoda Tartar is a creature that wishes for life. So you gave it life support?"

"Are you asking why I saved it?"

Lambda nodded to Ragna's question.

"Then just say so." He grumbled in annoyance. This one and the other one, Nu, these Prime Fields sure had complicated thought processes.

Leaning on his hand as if he were saying, "Good grief," Ragna messily put the antiseptic back into the first-aid kit.

"There's no big reason. I don't care if it lives or dies. It can live as long as it's alive, and everyone dies when it's their time. I just..." Ragna glanced at the Tartar.

As if it understood that it had been treated, the small bug, which had been completely exhausted until a moment ago, looked around with more energy.

"I just thought you wanted to save it, right?"

"Save?"

"You 'wished for life support' or something like that."

"Wish..." She muttered in a detached voice, as if pondering something, and slowly tilted her head.

Ragna sighed lightly. It seemed she was bad at self-reflection.

"At least that's what it looked like to me. ...If you want to save it, then you should save it. If you need someone's help for that, then you should use them. All I did was help you save it."

It was quite awkward to explain his actions to someone. Now knowing what expression to make, Ragna's face twisted into a scowl. Lambda looked at him as if observing him.

"Owner of Azure Grimoire... searching... match. Ragna the Bloodedge." Lambda called him in her usual flat, robotic voice. Ragna looked back at her with a puzzled expression as if to ask what was wrong, and Lambda's red eyes reflected him steadily, without any change in emotion. "Did Ragna... also... think?"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Did you think... you wanted to save Lambda? Is that why you saved me?"

The quiet question made Ragna's breath catch in his throat. She was probably referring to the incident with Arakune just now. He never expected his own words from a moment ago to be thrown back at him like this.

"I don't know. My body just moved on its own." He couldn't give her a straight answer. He gave her a curt reply as if to change the subject, closed the first-aid kit, and stood up. "Might as well go look for something to eat."

With soldiers living and working here, it would be easy to find food. But a question suddenly came to mind, and Ragna looked at Lambda.

"Can you... eat?"

She didn't seem to understand the meaning of the question, and Lambda tilted her head in the opposite direction from before as she looked up at Ragna.

"Whatever. Just wait here for a bit."

It was too much trouble to explain everything. Noel was also a Prime Field and seemed to live like a normal human, so he figured there wouldn't be any problems. Ragna started to rummage through the surveillance tower again. He found long-term storage food. He grabbed a compressed loaf of bread and a can of corned beef, and using the remaining seasonings, he made a corned beef sandwich.

It was a sandwich in name only. He put as much seasoned corned beef as he could on a slice of bread that had puffed up from the air, and then simply folded it in half.

It was a rough and unrefined lunch for a dish, but Ragna offered one of the two he had made to Lambda.

"Here. Don't be picky. It'd be a waste." He said, sitting roughly on a chair and taking a big bite of his own sandwich.

Even though it was preserved food, the quality was completely different from what they had in Orient Town and the supplies of the NOL in the upper layer.

The bread was soft all the way to the crust, and its subtle sweetness, along with a hint of saltiness, rose to the back of his nostrils with a tingling scent. The corned beef filling had a strong, peppery flavor, making it a surprisingly good dish for something made without a plan.

After giving his hungry stomach another big bite of this unexpected feast, Ragna remembered Lambda and looked at her.

The moment she received it, she had just stared blankly at it as if she didn't understand, but it seemed she had learned from watching Ragna. She held the folded bread precariously with both hands, copied how he ate, and took a big bite.

The amount she stuffed into her cheeks was a little too much for her small mouth. Her emotionless eyes widened slightly in surprise, and she moved her mouth with effort, tilting her head up a little so she wouldn't spill anything. Then she noticed Ragna was looking at her and tilted her head with her cheeks puffed out. It was so childish that Ragna couldn't help but burst out laughing.

"Tch, what's with that face?"

In response to Ragna's words, Lambda looked at the sandwich and Ragna in turns. She seemed to be trying to say that this was the face she made when she was eating this.

"Is it good?" Ragna asked, leaning back in his chair. His lips naturally relaxed into a smile.

Lambda didn't react right away and just chewed silently. After a while, as if she had finished "searching" and "matching," she swallowed the sandwich and nodded slightly.

Then, as if she had a sudden thought, she pulled a small piece of corned beef from the bread and held it out to the Tartar, which was still on the table.

The Tartar immediately noticed it and stuck its large mouth to the table, sucking it up.

It was a bizarre sight. A girl and a strange, never-before-seen bug were sharing a corned beef sandwich. And a globally wanted criminal was sitting there with them. It was a hopeless situation.

To Ragna, it was a sight so bizarre that it made him want to laugh, but at the same time, it was a bitter, heartbreaking sight that felt like needles scratching his chest.

This time, Lambda tore off a piece of bread to give to the Tartar and then bit into her own sandwich. She made sure not to stuff her cheeks too much this time, but her white cheeks were still puffed up.

As he watched her, Ragna unconsciously saw his younger sister, Saya, and then Noel in her.

Saya was always a clumsy child, and she ate slowly. Ragna would always finish his meal first.

He remembered a long time ago, at the church. The Sister always cooked, and Saya often watched her and wanted to copy her. But she was never as good as the Sister, and Ragna always ate the failed dishes. Back then, he never seriously thought about destroying something or killing someone.

"Decrease."

Hearing the voice, Ragna looked up from his memories. Lambda seemed to have just finished her meal, and the sandwich was no longer in her hands. Her hands were resting on the edge of the table, and she was staring intently at Tartar.

"Heart rate... decreasing."

Ragna understood what she had whispered in her small voice.

In her line of sight, the small bug, which had been eating the bread and corned beef with her, had fallen on its side and was weakly writhing. Next to it was a piece of torn bread, its last bite. It no longer had the strength to eat even that.

"It's at its limit. It's impressive that it lasted this long away from its host," Ragna said in a naturally subdued tone.

It was a disgusting bug. But seeing Lambda interact with it with so much unconscious affection, he couldn't help but feel something about its dying state.

Lambda didn't take her eyes off of it for a moment. The Tartar's movements grew weaker and weaker until it wasn't moving at all. And then, a few seconds later-

"Heart stopped. Mollusca, Gastropoda, Tartar, male... all life support functions stopped... death." Lambda muttered with a hint of melancholy. She looked up at Ragna as if she was panicking. "Treatment..."

Ragna had expected her to say that and shook his head as if to convince her.

"You don't have to do anything. I told you. Everyone dies when it's their time. For this guy, that time was now."

Lambda shook her head as well in response to Ragna's words. It was a childish gesture. It looked as if she was deeply saddened, because despite her emotionless face, she gently and carefully scooped up the Tartar's small body into her palm as if cherishing it.

"Then just remember it. Just remember in a corner of your soul that it was here with you, ate with you, and spent time with you until you naturally forget."

"Soul? Where?"

"I don't know. Maybe in your head, or maybe deep in your chest. ...It's just a place that feels warm when you're happy and cold when you're sad."

Whether she understood Ragna's words or not, Lambda tilted her head in a puzzled way and then looked down at her chest. She stroked the Tartar's body on her palm with her fingertip.

"Should we bury it?" Ragna suggested. He felt that she would probably stay like this forever if he didn't do something.

"Why?" Lambda stopped stroking her and looked up, and in front of her, Ragna picked up the last piece of bread the Tartar had left behind. He thought he might as well give it an offering.

"We're going to make a grave. That's usually where humans are buried when they die." He said as he stood up and watched Lambda's reaction. Lambda was quick to understand. She held the Tartar's sleeping body in her cupped hands, making sure not to drop it, and stood up from her chair as if to follow. By that time, Ragna had already started to walk outside, and Lambda followed behind him with a puppy-like stare.

On the edge of a now-deserted NOL facility, there was a lush, green park. The upper layers of the city were full of similar parks, big and small, no matter which area you went to.

In a small hole he dug at the base of a large tree in the back of the park, he laid the lifeless body of a Gastropod, a creature from the phylum Mollusca, on the soil. Next to it, he placed a piece of bread, perhaps its first and last meal, covered it with dirt, and buried it. In this quiet, deserted corner of the city, there was no chance of it being dug up. At least for a while, it could sleep undisturbed.

Lambda, who seemed to have learned about graves from her usual searches, borrowed a flower from a park flowerbed and laid it on the slightly mounded dirt.

...Was it kindness or whim that made him wait for the small burial ceremony to finish?

When Ragna and Lambda turned around, ready to leave, a giant red figure stood there.

"Nice of you to come pick us up, Red Devil." Ragna said. "Tell your boss to keep a better eye on her kids."

"I see," the Red Devil, Tager, said in a deep, calm voice. "You've been corrupted by the Grim Reaper."

He lifted his arm, which was as heavy and solid as a weapon. As he spread his large hand, a device on his arm hummed to life, and sparks of electricity crackled in his palm.

But it wasn't an attack. An invisible electromagnetic force pulled Lambda's body toward him.

"Ah..." As she was drawn in by the unseen force, Lambda looked at Ragna. She didn't resist but was calmly carried to Tager's side, where she settled on his strong, broad shoulder.

Perhaps it was because Tager was so big, but from a distance, Lambda looked much smaller and more helpless than she had been up close.

"The incident with Lambda was caused by a transfer device malfunction," Tager said, pushing up his sunglasses with the hand he'd used to retrieve Lambda. The sunglasses were comically small for his massive head. "However, it took so long to recover her because there was a problem pinpointing her location. Kokonoe tried to infiltrate the NOL's Kagutsuchi branch mainframe through the network and search the entire Kagutsuchi management system for her location. But for some reason, the mainframe wasn't functioning."

"Huh? What are you talking about? I don't get it. Explain it simply." What Tager talked about was unusually verbose, and it went right over the head of Ragna, who wasn't familiar with machines.

Tager saw Ragna's frustrated scowl and kindly broke it down for him.

"The device that manages and monitors Kagutsuchi has completely stopped working for some reason. It's likely there was a major accident at the Kagutsuchi branch. Be careful if you head there." It was information that Ragna, who had no communication devices or research tools, couldn't have possibly known. Ragna raised an eyebrow and looked Tager over.

"Is this your way of thanking me? And how did you know I was going to the branch?"

"Where else would you be going after coming all this way? Either way, this is just some advice. Take it however you want. I'll be going... no, wait." Tager had started to turn away with an uncharacteristically gentlemanly demeanor, but stopped. He put his hand to his ear, as if receiving a communication.

There was only one person he knew who would be calling him. Ragna's eyes instantly narrowed in anticipation of the voice he knew was coming.

"Ragna the Bloodedge."

I knew it, Ragna thought with a bitter smile.

The weary, arrogant voice that looked down on him belonged to Kokonoe. However, the connection was poor, and there was a lot of static.

"Let me give you some advice as thanks. Don't fight Yuuki Terumi. You'll never be able to defeat him."

"What did you say?" Ragna's voice grew ominously dark at the dismissive, matter-of-fact tone. The name Yuuki Terumi caused his hands to instinctively clench into fists. "What do you mean, I can't beat him? You don't know that until you try! Besides, you have no right to give me orders!"

As he roared back, Ragna recalled the words he had heard yesterday.

You must not fight Yuuki Terumi. In your current state, you will never be able to defeat him.

Trinity, the third personality in the girl with three souls in one body, had said the exact same thing as Kokonoe.

Both Trinity and Kokonoe offered ominous prophecies without any regard for how he felt. Even if it was true, he refused to back down and give up.

The burning feeling in his gut wouldn't allow him to make that choice. If he lost his purpose of finding Terumi after feeling sympathy for a Prime Field, he wouldn't know what he was even standing here for.

Through the static, he heard Kokonoe's annoyed sigh.

"You're hopeless. I'm telling you not to fight him because you can't win. And besides... I'm *the one who's going to kill him."* Her tone, which had been indifferent until now, suddenly revealed a thirst for blood.

Ragna furrowed his brow. Now that he thought about it, Kokonoe had also shown clear hostility and emotion when Terumi appeared in the underground of Kagutsuchi.

"You're going to kill him? Heh, good one. What kind of secret plan do you have, then?" Ragna asked in a mocking tone. It infuriated him that she was so confident she could do something he couldn't.

Kokonoe's reply was cold and short, but contained deep hostility.

"That's what Lambda is for. Anyway, I've given you my advice." With nothing more to say, the communication ended.

The air around Tager crackled with a sound like sparking electricity. Within a few seconds, Tager and Lambda's figures became distorted by static before they vanished.

It was a transfer. It must have been the same device that had brought Lambda to the restaurant in Orient Town.

Ragna was left alone.

The area was a deserted ghost town. There was no sign of anyone nearby, and the only sound was the wind. The lush park now seemed desolate.

Ragna stood there, glaring at the spot where Tager had been. As she vanished in the transfer, Lambda had been looking at him the whole time. She wasn't trying to say anything, just staring.

Kokonoe had said she would use Lambda to kill Terumi. Lambda was a Prime Field Device, a living weapon. It wasn't strange for her to be used as a tool. That's what she was created for in the first place. But the thought of that girl, who didn't understand good or evil, life or death, being destroyed and turned into scrap metal by Terumi... it made his blood boil.

"This is stupid," he muttered out loud. "I'm done looking after her. What happens to her isn't my problem. I can't be bothered to deal with it anymore."

Even as he said it, Ragna's heart was betraying his words. He was thinking that he didn't want Lambda to be forced to challenge Terumi.

And as for Terumi, there was Noel to worry about, too.

Not only was Kokonoe targeting him, but Terumi had also spoken as if Noel were something special. What if Terumi wanted to use Noel as a Prime Field, as a tool, just like Lambda?

For a moment, Ragna remembered the day his childhood church burned down, and his little sister was carried away by Terumi.

"Damn it!" Ragna cursed, covering his face with his hand. His desire to kill Yuuki Terumi was fueled by revenge. As long as he had anger and hatred, he could fight.

And yet, static kept getting in the way of his burning emotions. His feelings were complicated by the existence of the Prime Fields that shared his sister's face.

As if to shake off his frustration, Ragna began walking with long strides. No matter how many problems he pondered and untangled, there was only one place he was headed.

"In the end, all I can do is move forward, huh?"

With a small, frustrated sigh, he messed with his hair and left the ghost town, heading straight for the Kagutsuchi branch.

3

January 4, 2200 - 14:55

The moment he stepped inside, the air was distinctly different from the outside.

This was the Novus Orbis Librarium's Kagutsuchi branch.

Beautiful carvings adorned the white walls everywhere, and the polished floors were like mirrors. The lavish interior, more like a noble's mansion than a military facility, was still illuminated by Ars Magus lights from the elaborately designed lamps, even though the branch's functions had been lost.

Due to an explosion that occurred underground at the turn of 2199 to 2200, all the branch's guards were temporarily evacuated. ...Or so the story went in the upper layers of Kagutsuchi. In reality, this branch had been empty for hours before that.

And it was still deserted.

Naturally, there were no watchful eyes, and not a single part of the security system was functioning. Therefore, it was incredibly easy for Jin to enter this empty branch, just as he had a few days ago.

The brightly lit corridor stretched long and straight, leading to the cathedral ahead. With the cool sound of his boots echoing in a silence similar to the deep sea, Jin walked without hesitation.

He was heading for the underground research facility.

He wanted to check on the status of something that was there. That something was the "Cauldron," which connected the world to the "Boundary," a strange dimension outside of it.

Jin had never seen a "Cauldron" with his own eyes, though they were said to exist in the underground of every Hierarchical City in the world. But he understood what it was and that it existed.

If the Cauldron was still functional, his brother Ragna the Bloodedge would come to destroy it. If it was broken, his brother would soon leave Kagutsuchi to destroy another Cauldron.

As he walked, Jin couldn't get rid of the frown on his face. There were countless things he knew he had to do. But Jin still hadn't been able to organize his reasons for them. His heart was filled with impatience. It felt like he was cornering himself.

"Ugh..." He let out a pained voice without realizing it, clutching Yukianesa so hard it hurt.

Yukianesa still hadn't been unsheathed.

His pace quickened without realizing it, and he passed through the corridor and entered the cathedral. The ceiling suddenly soared high, and an oppressive sense of freedom rained down along with the blinding light from above.

As he walked, Jin glanced at the giant statue of the goddess in the center of the cathedral. That same goddess statue that many soldiers looked up to with reverence was nothing but a source of annoyance to Jin now.

Everything was so unclear. And within that ambiguity, only someone's intentions seemed to swell. This delusional feeling followed him all the way.

He crossed in front of the goddess statue and headed for the stairs behind it. Just before he left the pale light, Jin thought he heard the sound of light wings fluttering.

...No, that was wrong. He didn't just *think* he heard it. He *actually* heard it. The fluttering rose high to the ceiling behind Jin and then scattered.

It changed into a barrier.

Jin immediately turned around and placed his hand on Yukianesa's hilt.

The barrier had been created to seal off part of this space, but it wasn't Ars Magus. It was something different.

As Jin's eyes darted around the barrier, a single girl came into his view.

She must have been hiding in the shadow of a thick pillar. Slowly walking toward him, away from the pillar she had been leaning on, the girl wore a white military uniform reminiscent of an older era, a white winged cap, and carried a small, quill-like sword in her right hand. Floating close to her left arm was what looked like a book with a strange shape.

Jin couldn't move. It wasn't because of any strange power. He was just so surprised by what he saw that his entire body froze, and he forgot how to think.

The approaching girl stopped when she was a certain distance away. Because her chin was tucked in and she was looking down, the brim of her cap cast a shadow, and he couldn't see her expression. But the pale pink of her tightly pursed lips and the red hair flowing down the side of her face gave off an intense burst of color against the white uniform and white background.

"Tsubaki..." Jin hoarsely called out the girl's name. He wondered how long it had been since he'd last said that name.

In response to Jin's voice, which seemed to get absorbed and disappear into the high ceiling, the girl walking in the light, Tsubaki, opened her pink lips while still looking down.

"Major Jin Kisaragi, isn't it? I've finally found you." Her voice was cold. And her demeanor was just as cold.

Jin furrowed his brow tightly. The person in front of him wasn't the serious, somewhat naggy childhood friend he had spent his youth and student days with.

This was Lieutenant Tsubaki Yayoi, of the Novus Orbis Librarium's Zero Squadron, the "Wings of Justice."

He'd heard from Makoto that Tsubaki had been assigned to the Zero Squadron, but seeing her actually assume that role filled him with mixed emotions.

And more importantly...

"Tsubaki. That weapon... What's the meaning of this?"

As a member of one of the Duodecim, Jin had heard of the "Sealed Armament: Izayoi." He knew it was a weapon used during the Dark War and the price it demanded in exchange for its power. Everyone who used Izayoi during the Dark War had used up all their power and lost their lives on the same day.

"As you may already know, my mission is to carry out the assassination order against you. To do that, I need the power to fight you on equal footing."

Tsubaki was skilled enough in combat to be approved for assignment to the Zero Squadron. But Jin being her opponent was a different matter. It was obvious that an unarmed Tsubaki would be killed in retaliation if she attempted to assassinate Jin.

The fact that an assassination order was given to Tsubaki, despite the obvious power difference, likely meant that they were implicitly asking her to use her personal feelings for the target as a weapon.

But Tsubaki sought a fight based on power, not an assassination through a plot that leveraged their relationship.

"I know a lot about the Izayoi. It takes away your sight... or light." As she spoke without lifting her head, Tsubaki's voice was calm, so calm that it was dark and heavy. "I don't want to fight needlessly either. Major Jin Kisaragi, it's not too late. Please put down your weapon and surrender. You have been charged with treason and desertion, but... I believe there were sufficient circumstances that led to it."

Jin listened to Tsubaki's words, which maintained her composure, but he shook his head.

"I can't surrender."

"Why not?!" It was only then that Tsubaki's voice grew strong. As if realizing her mistake, she tightened her lips and opened her mouth again with the coldness of a Wing of Justice. "Major Kisaragi, your actions disrespect the Librarium. For someone like you to sully the name of the NOL, the absolute justice that governs the world..."

"The Librarium's justice is worthless." Jin said, firmly and dismissively. He felt Tsubaki's body stiffen, but he continued without caring. The "justice" Tsubaki spoke of irritated him. "Justice is a privilege only victors can speak of. Not just the Librarium; anyone who wins can flaunt it and justify their actions in the name of justice. Just as the Librarium did in the land of Ikaruga."

"Are you trying to insult the Librarium?"

"An insult is when you compare people. I'm just describing something worthless with the appropriate words."

"You've gone too far, Major!" Tsubaki's voice was sharp and commanding, like a slap.

Tsubaki was someone who, for better or worse, was thoroughly steeped in the ways of the Duodecim. She truly believed the NOL was absolute.

True to her nature, Tsubaki's voice was filled with a sense of duty as she directed a hostile aura toward Jin.

"Words like that will be interpreted as an intent to rebel against the NOL."

"I don't care how it's interpreted."

"That's a shame... Major Kisaragi." Tsubaki took a half-step back, putting her sword-wielding right hand behind her and her left, which held the thick, book-like shield, forward.

Her allotted time for negotiation seemed to be over.

While feeling a sense of unease that Tsubaki still wouldn't lift her head even as she took a fighting stance, Jin opened his mouth and spoke in a slightly stronger tone.

"Tsubaki. There's one more thing I wanted to ask. Why did you join the Zero Squadron? That... garbage disposal unit of the NOL."

It was a unit created to preemptively eliminate dangerous individuals for the sake of order, and even more so, to maintain the absolute stability of the Novus Orbis Librarium. No matter what

flowery words anyone used to describe its purpose, for Jin, the Zero Squadron was that kind of place.

It didn't suit Tsubaki. He couldn't help but feel that a more normal path, like that of a common soldier, would've been more fitting for her.

"That's right. At first, I had my own reasons for wanting to join. But, now..." Tsubaki pointed the tip of her sword at Jin and replied in a calm voice, but her voice trembled. "Now, I don't know anymore."

The image of a small, weak girl passed over the downcast Tsubaki like a shadow and then vanished. It was Tsubaki herself who had shaken it off. She swung the sword with a transparent red blade, tearing through the air and raising her shield.

"Major Kisaragi, prepare yourself!"

With that, light overflowed from Tsubaki's shield and transformed into a pair of wings. Tsubaki's feet kicked off the floor, and the wings of the shield carried her in a straight line.

She was fast. Counterattacking with a drawing slash was a more certain option than dodging. Otherwise, Tsubaki's shield would turn the overflowing light into a weapon and send Jin flying hard into a wall.

But... Jin's sword was not drawn from its sheath, nor did Tsubaki's shield hit Jin, causing his bones to creak and him to be slammed into a wall.

For a moment, the cathedral was filled with a silence where only light flickered.

Under the gaze of the pure white goddess statue, Jin and Tsubaki's shadows overlapped into one. Jin stood still, his sword hanging at his side, not even touching the hilt. Tsubaki leaned into Jin's chest, as if throwing herself at him, without the shield she should've slammed into him or the sword that should've pierced his chest.

Jin's eyes were wide, and Tsubaki's body was tense. Both were taken by an unexpected surprise.

"W-why..." Tsubaki was the first to speak. Her voice trembled, letting out her pent-up emotions in a thin stream. "Why... why didn't you cut me down?!"

Her voice filled with sorrow. Her sword trembled, and the hand that had been touching Jin's chest as if to stab him now clung to his clothes.

"And you. Why didn't you stab me?" Understanding the situation, Jin also asked Tsubaki, his eyebrows tightly furrowed.

With her knees trembling as if they might give way at any moment, Tsubaki struggled to steady herself, unable to lift her face from Jin's chest as she shook her head.

"I... I can't possibly do that! I... I..." If she said any more, she felt she would burst into tears, so Tsubaki bit her lip and stopped speaking. But she couldn't stop the tears from overflowing and wetting her cheeks.

She had been ordered to carry the crushing burden of killing her best friend and her brother-in-law. Then she was told she didn't have to carry such a duty after all, and that her best friend was responsible for the reality she now faced, and she had raised her blade at that same friend. Tsubaki's mind had reached its limit.

Jin watched Tsubaki's hunched, fragile shoulders with an anguished look. She was desperately trying to hold back her sobs, like a broken string that couldn't be fixed.

When Tsubaki had charged at him with murderous intent, a vision had flashed in Jin's mind.

On some dry, dirt road, Tsubaki was rushing toward him with that red sword in her hand. A small child suddenly leaped between Jin and Tsubaki, and Jin instinctively shielded the child. Immediately after, Tsubaki's sword pierced Jin from behind. As his consciousness faded, he heard Tsubaki's trembling voice.

He had thought it was a hallucination.

He'd decided that it would be better to be killed by Tsubaki than to kill her.

"Tsubaki, no more..." He was about to tell her not to cry and reached for her shoulder, trying to separate himself from her. But Jin's breath immediately stopped. He felt a strange, obvious unease.

Tsubaki's eyes weren't focused as she shifted. It wasn't confusion or embarrassment. Her expression faltered, as if searching for something, so Jin forcefully pulled her away. He pushed up her Izayoi cap and peered into her eyes, the very eyes she had stubbornly refused to let him see.

"You..."

Her beautiful sky-blue eyes were clouded. They reflected nothing.

Sensing the situation from Jin's reaction, Tsubaki hurriedly raised her hands to cover her eyes. But she soon gave in and lowered them.

"Yes. I... I can't see anymore."

"Since when?!"

"I could still see a bit when I got here. But when I first put up the barrier... nothing." Nothing was left.

Placing her hand over Jin's, which tightly gripped her shoulder, Tsubaki lowered her head again as if to hide her lightless eyes. Jin didn't have to ask to know she didn't want him to see them.

Struggling to control her trembling shoulders, Tsubaki pleaded, no longer able to feign strength.

"Please, Brother Jin. Come back to the unit... to the NOL. I... I don't want to kill you. I can't do that! I can't!"

Tsubaki was desperate. It sounded like she was pleading for help.

Jin narrowed his eyes and looked at Tsubaki. She was such a clumsy girl. The mission of an assassin and her sense of duty to not betray her orders must've been an incredibly heavy burden on her small shoulders. Even now, that weight was still bearing down on her.

Jin's hand remained on her shoulder, but he replied with unwavering resolve.

"I'm sorry, but I can't go back to the NOL."

Tsubaki, still looking down, lowered her chin further, dejected.

"Why... Brother Jin?"

"I have something I have to do. Something I must do. Something I absolutely have to accomplish, no matter what."

His thoughts, previously unclear and uncertain, were now starting to become clearer.

His mind, which had been in turmoil, was gradually regaining its composure. Suppressing his own frustrations with himself, Jin spoke to Tsubaki with a certainty that was undoubtedly his own.

"If I've done wrong, I'll accept my punishment. But if I go back now, I'll be nothing more than a pawn, just dancing to the tune of the NOL. There's something I have to find and something I have to know. And right now, it's probably here in Kagutsuchi."

That something was Ragna the Bloodedge.

He wanted to kill his brother. When he realized what was making him feel so strongly about it, Jin felt like he had finally discovered who he was, not just a puppet.

"I've been a clown all this time, but I feel like I've finally found something I need to do on my own. Please, Tsubaki, let me go. Let me do this."

"Brother Jin..."

Tsubaki listened to Jin's unusually impassioned voice in the darkness, as if clinging to it. A thin, trembling breath escaped her lips. She had never heard Jin speak with such passion before. She had never been called by her name with such force.

She had thought she wouldn't regret losing her sight if it meant stopping Jin, but hearing this, she did. If she could still see today, she could have seen Jin's beautiful eyes, filled with passion.

A few seconds later, Tsubaki made up her mind and lifted her head.

"Brother Jin, I understand. I..."

"Heh heh heh, you're wavering, Tsubaki-chan."

A man's voice suddenly echoed, stealing all the air from the space. It was a terribly vulgar and somewhat cruel voice, like it was crawling up from the depths of a shadow. Jin instinctively took a defensive stance and looked around, but the cackling sound mocked him.

"It's useless, useless, useless, Jin Kisaragi. You guys can't see me right now. After all, this place is inside the Izayoi barrier."

The Izayoi steals light. And the Izayoi seals light.

The inside of the Izayoi barrier was, in a sense, a separate, sealed world. It was a space cut off from the original world by blocking out light. But the unsettling man's voice crossed even the boundary of space-time that Izayoi had severed, stirring up emotions.

"No, no, no, Tsubaki-chan. If you act like such a convenient woman, you might get everything taken from you. Just like how everything you were supposed to have was taken away..."

"Taken... away..." Tsubaki repeated deliriously to the echoing, unseen voice. The expression on her face, which had been directed at Jin, stiffened, twitching as if in fear of some unknown terror.

"Tsubaki!"

Something was wrong. Noticing this, Jin called out to her as if to scold her, but Tsubaki didn't even glance at him, clutching her head with both hands. Her teeth chattered.

"No... No, no more..."

"Something's wrong, isn't it? This wasn't how it was supposed to be, was it? Take a good look at what's left in front of you. Calm down... is now the time to be so relaxed?"

"I... I... Everything... is gone... Then what was I doing... what was it all... for... Ah..."

"Tsubaki, don't listen to that snake's words!"

Large tears, like a broken faucet, overflowed from Tsubaki's wide-open eyes. Her shoulders jumped at Jin's voice, and she cringed, covering her ears with her hands.

"You have to protect what you want with your own hands... Tsubaki Yayoi."

The laughing voice began to erode Tsubaki's heart. As if to show this, Izayoi's garment that Tsubaki was wearing gradually turned black as if it was soaking up ink.

Like something heavy slipping off, Tsubaki's hunched body relaxed, and her arms hung limply. In her right hand, the red blade of judgment. In her left, the shield of an old book, not the scales of truth. Tsubaki gripped the hilt of the newly appeared sword.

"Don't... don't take anything else... from me...! UUUWAAAAAAH!" It was a scream. Her deranged eyes had no light, no self. Tsubaki swung her sword wildly and kicked off the floor, holding her shield up.

Now aiming the tip of her sword at Jin, a pair of wings wrapped around her black-stained outfit with a thirst for blood, and she thrust the sword without any hesitation.

4

Jin's scabbard managed to deflect the sharp attack just in time.

But the red blade gracefully tore through the air, sweeping sideways. It slashed upward, then diagonally down from a high position. When he ducked low and delivered a kick, she immediately used her shield as a weapon, swinging it to strike him.

Tsubaki's persistent attacks were relentlessly trying to cause harm, aimed at his vital points solely to end his life.

She looked pitiful. Having lost her sight, Tsubaki couldn't see Jin with her own eyes; it was always Izayoi's eyes that fixed on the target. It was Izayoi that was running and swinging the sword.

As he blocked and narrowly dodged the continuous attacks, Jin saw his own shadow superimposed on Tsubaki.

Her state was exactly how he had been when he was controlled by Yukianesa. Unaware he was being driven to madness, he would swing his sword and lash out as demanded, falling endlessly and unable to see his own pathetic state.

The red sword, which unfolded like a bellows, bent and came at Jin from high above. Jin held it off with Yukianesa's scabbard, enduring the unusually long, irregular slash.

As soon as she knew she was blocked, Tsubaki kicked the scabbard and used the recoil to leap, bringing her shield down from a high position. The light that spilled from the shield became a pair of wings and rushed at Jin. The wings, which had been a brilliant white just a moment ago, were now a dark, crimson color, as if they had gathered darkness.

Jin dodged it by a hair's breadth. The wings shattered the floor with a ferocity that didn't match their graceful appearance.

"Ugh... Tsubaki, stop it! Don't use the Izayoi anymore!" Jin shouted, fragments of the broken floor hitting his cheek.

Izayoi wasn't just powerful; it was a weapon said to have been a model for the phenomenon weapons during the Dark War. A phenomenon weapon deeply influences the user's mind and can sometimes control the user.

Tsubaki had already lost her sight. It wasn't hard to imagine what would happen if she continued to use Izayoi.

"Listen, Tsubaki!"

The only reply to his voice was the fluttering of Izayoi's wings as they flew high. With a single flap, they carried the blank-eyed Tsubaki and rushed at Jin from above.

Her red hair fluttered with her cape. In that color, Jin felt thoughts of love.

It was the image of a young girl. Holding a precious doll, she offered a small pinky finger, making a promise.

It was the image of a girl in her student days. Holding some papers she'd helped with, she smiled proudly, saying, "I did it."

It was a girl Jin didn't know. With vivid red hair and sharp sky-blue eyes. Wearing a hat with an eyeball and wings and a white military uniform, she brandished a red sword and led her army into battle.

Who is this? Jin wondered about the girl he saw at the end of the vision. The details were different from Tsubaki, but that was probably Izayoi.

The scene was... in the middle of the Dark War. Unknown memories emerged as if they were his own, and Jin was confused.

It was a strange feeling, as if someone else's memories were overlapping with his own.

"It seems you've synchronized well." A voice suddenly echoed. But it wasn't his ears that were listening; it was Jin's consciousness itself. The voice was low and solemn, yet it continued with a familiar resonance. *“Do not be dazzled. Seek not the object, but its shadow. Synchronize your breath with mine.”*

He had a thousand things he wanted to say in response to the arrogant tone, but Jin looked up as if prompted and guided.

Everything that had just happened was in an instant, a flash of a feeling. Tsubaki was still in the air, descending with her fluttering shield.

Behind Tsubaki, wearing a foul, dyed garment... he saw a shadow.

A dark shadow, with its outline dyed green. It had empty, green eye sockets and smiled eerily with a thin, crescent-shaped mouth.

(*A shadow... so that's it!*)

He felt someone's breathing as if it were his own. *Match my breathing.* The voice had said.

As Tsubaki descended, Jin saw the cursed shadow clinging to her back. He held Yukianesa vertically, still in its scabbard. His body moved on its own, as if it had known what to do from the very beginning.

Tsubaki's wings spread wide. The moment she was about to strike, Jin swung his sword down in a single breath, accompanied by the sound of his voice.

His battle cry and Tsubaki's look of shock were drowned out as the gale tore across the ground. Sword pressure shot up from the ground, cutting through the shadow lurking behind Tsubaki just as she was about to strike.

Immediately, the air around Jin seemed to flutter, and the barrier dispersed. The illusion of feathers, the same color as the black-dyed Izayoi's red wings, scattered, and the unknowingly muted colors of the world regained their vibrant brilliance.

The cathedral of the NOL branch was the same as it had been just a moment ago. But there was one difference. A man stood right beside the exhausted Tsubaki, who had collapsed onto her knees.

It was a man in a black suit and a black hat, with a sneering smile.

"You're Hazama from the Intelligence Department..."

"My, my, so you *do* remember me. It's an honor, 'Hero of Ikaruga.'"

Facing Jin, who had his weapon ready, Hazama showed no signs of caution. With a fixed smile, he took off his hat and bowed. The attitude annoyed Jin, and he scowled.

"What are you planning? Get away from Lieutenant Tsubaki Yayoi." Jin realized that this was the man's voice. The atmosphere and his way of speaking were completely different, but it was undoubtedly the same voice that had driven Tsubaki to madness in Izayoi's barrier.

With an exaggerated gesture, Hazama calmly put his hat back on and looked down at the unconscious Tsubaki from under the deep brim that hid his eyes.

"My, what a handful Lieutenant Tsubaki Yayoi is. I was kind enough to give her a stage to stand on, but she's still a useless piece of garbage. Well, I guess in the end, garbage is still garbage."

"You..."

Hazama shrugged his shoulders and shook his head, as if genuinely disappointed, and Jin's hostility toward him went beyond mere caution. It was almost murderous. But Hazama didn't care about Jin's reaction and threw his voice elsewhere.

"Phantom. Take out the trash."

An invisible presence seemed to shimmer and move, and in the next moment, the unconscious Tsubaki vanished from the cathedral. She had been forcibly teleported.

Jin instinctively took a step forward as if to follow.

There was no sign of Ars Magus being used. He had no idea what power had made Tsubaki disappear.

A shiver went down his spine, and Jin placed his hand on Yukianesa's hilt. It didn't matter if it wouldn't unsheathe. It was enough of a weapon. He glared sharply at Hazama's smirking face and raised his voice.

"Where did you take Tsubaki?"

"She's garbage, but she's still useful. I simply retrieved her."

He had chosen his words to deliberately rile up Jin's emotions, using the word "garbage" every time he spoke. It was as if he was enjoying watching Jin's mind sizzle with anger and hatred.

"But still... you've gone and done something unnecessary. Forcing your way into a person's mind and breaking the Izayoi's barrier." At Hazama's muttering, Jin's gaze turned suspicious.

(*Forcing your way... into a person's mind?*)

Before he could even consider if that was possible, he realized something. When he broke Izayoi's barrier, there was someone else's presence inside his consciousness.

That single strike that had torn through the ground wasn't Jin's technique. At that moment, the consciousness of the one who'd interfered had borrowed Jin's arm and sword to swing it.

"My, my, it seems this event was a bust. If the Power of Order awakens here, things might get a little messy... I guess I'll abandon this event and go observe the next one." Hazama turned to face Jin again, sighing in extreme annoyance and letting his shoulders slump.

Jin didn't understand what Hazama was talking about. Hazama knew far too many things that Jin didn't, and Jin's current knowledge couldn't even begin to grasp what he meant. But he didn't need any more knowledge to understand that Hazama's disturbing cruelty had driven Tsubaki mad.

"Don't think that everything will go exactly as you want... Hazama."

Jin's grip tightened on the scabbard. It was a pure anger he hadn't felt in a long time, without any conflict or hesitation. Perhaps it was a good thing that Yukianesa wouldn't unsheathe. He could feel all of his current emotions were truly his own, without being misled by a killing intent.

"Heh heh heh, my, how scary. Don't get so worked up. It seems even the Hero of Ikaruga has a soft spot for a childhood friend. Well, well, I can't overlook that." Every time Hazama opened his mouth, his words get on Jin's nerves.

Jin scowled in disgust, unable to pretend he felt nothing, and Hazama gave him a menacing look from under the shadow of his hat. He casually lowered his center of gravity, ready to move at a moment's notice, giving him the unsettling appearance of a reptile hunting its prey.

"However, it's annoying when people get too carried away. Since this event is ending anyway, it would be a shame not to..." Hazama's nonchalant, polite voice suddenly dropped to an ominous low. His calculating eyes turned into a vicious glare, and he smiled thinly. "How about I get to see your crying face before I go home?"

Changing his demeanor completely, as if flipping a coin, Hazama folded his tall body forward and rushed in. He aimed low and slashed at an awkward angle. A slender butterfly knife had appeared in his hand.

Instantly pulling his body back, Jin watched as a slender blade, moving at an incredible speed, slashed right in front of his eyes. It was a small knife, but in this man's hand, its reverse blade looked like a poisonous fang that shouldn't be touched.

Hazama immediately followed up with another attack, pulling out a knife with his left hand and slashing both in a crisscross pattern. Then, with a deft spin, he swept the two knives upward from his waist.

"Ugh..."

Lacking range, he was incredibly fast. Jin had to block the second attack with Yukianesa.

Hazama leaped as if to flip over and brought his long arms down with the knives. Jin blocked with his scabbard, but Hazama didn't immediately retreat, instead locking blades with Yukianesa.

He smirked at the close proximity with a serpentine face. The poisonous smile, which entered a person's mind, ignited a burning hatred in Jin's heart.

"It's a shame, though. I'm sure Tsubaki Yayoi-san would be quite displeased with such a bland final scene. It would have been a little more dramatic if she'd at least killed you. Like before."

"Shut up!"

He didn't want to hear any more of his nonsense. He spat the words out, but then Jin gasped at Hazama's words.

The most sensitive part of Jin's consciousness gave him an understanding.

This man knew.

Jin didn't know what to call it, but he knew the world's true form, how it worked, who was where, and what they were doing... he probably knew everything.

Yes, Jin had indeed been killed by Tsubaki once before. He remembered the vision he had just seen.

It was not a delusion or a fantasy. It was something that had truly happened to Jin somewhere.

His thoughts raced, and his memories came flooding back. It had happened on the outskirts of Ronin-Gai. He'd gotten into a fight with Tsubaki, who had been pursuing him, and in the middle of it, Tsubaki had pierced Jin from behind with a needle.

At that time, he had certainly wanted to call out her name.

Perhaps it wasn't just once. Maybe Jin had been killed by Tsubaki dozens, or even hundreds of times. And each time, the world had provided a different outline, one after another.

This moment he stood in was one of many stories, one of many possibilities for the world.

Thousands, hundreds of millions. A world structure built on worlds that "might have been" repeated over and over again.

This man knew about it and was using Tsubaki for his own purposes. As a piece of garbage that had use and wouldn't be missed even if it was discarded somewhere.

(*Tsubaki...*)

Jin bit his lip hard, as if to scold himself. He wondered if Tsubaki had been hurt every time the world... or rather, the "event" as Hazama had called it, was repeated. Sometimes killing someone, sometimes fighting, and each time being used, read, and cornered.

If such a thing existed, if such a ridiculous logic bound Tsubaki...

He wanted to sever it.

"Huh?"

In that instant, Jin felt as if a cold needle had pierced his entire body. He instinctively deflected the knife that was closing in on him and leaped back.

He didn't feel attacked. The sensation was not unpleasant.

Instead, the coolness that passed through him gave Jin a sense of peace and a clarity of thought he'd never experienced before.

It was like knowledge, vision that could see the very air itself, and hearing that could listen to the sound of light.

It was a feeling similar to remembering something long forgotten. Or like instantly waking up from a deep sleep. Or like realizing the incredibly simple solution to a problem that had been troubling him for a long time.

Jin let go of his body, which had been poised to counter the next attack, and released the tension. He took one, deep, calm breath.

His green eyes looked at Hazama, who was standing straight ahead. He could see a line leading to him as he toyed with the butterfly knife in his hand, opening and closing it.

A black line.

Jin already knew what the line meant. It was a line that led to something that needed to be cut. The evil that must be defeated. The wickedness that must be controlled. The chaos that must be corrected.

It was a sign showing what must be cut down by the blade of order.

The line stretched straight to Hazama. What must be cut was not Hazama's body. It was this line.

"Oh, are you losing your will to fight? Well, in that case... I suppose I'll just have to chop you up without any hesitation!"

Hazama grinned maliciously and swung his arm wide. The distance was too great for a knife. But what Hazama released was not a knife, but a chain that tore through the air.

"Ouroboros!"

The chain with a serpent-like head at its tip was one of the phenomenon weapons, the Geminus Anguium: Ouroboros. As he stared at it, Jin smoothly grabbed the hilt of Yukianesa. It felt cold to the touch. But that was all.

The serpent's head, which was coming straight at him, opened its jaw as if to devour him. Just before the black fangs could seize him...

"Without a trace..."

"What?!" He heard Hazama's panic, or perhaps it was the other face lurking within him.

Without a moment's hesitation, Jin took a deep step forward and unsheathed Yukianesa.

"-Winter’s Riposte." The name that slipped from his mouth was like a subconscious whisper.

Yukianesa slid out of its scabbard without a sound, gliding as Jin willed it. The resistance that had stubbornly kept it from moving before was like a lie.

The blade, which looked as white as snow in the light of the cathedral, was coldly beautiful. As Jin willed it, it made a deep, wide, and sharp cut across Hazama's chest.

"Kah..."

The sound of air escaping his lungs came from behind Jin. Carried by the momentum of his step and slash, Jin had moved past Hazama's body to the opposite side.

The force of the attack was that sharp.

"This is... hahaha, well, well, I'm defeated..." Jin turned around to the voice that found this situation hilarious.

Hazama was still standing. He laughed, his shoulders shaking, as he looked at the crimson blood pouring from his chest and wetting his palms. On the floor around his feet, drops of blood created a pattern, on the verge of becoming a small pool.

Still twisted into an awkward posture, Hazama turned to face him. His mouth was smiling, but from under the shadow of his hat, his narrow, sharp eyes gleamed with an unsettling intensity.

"The Power of Order... I was completely caught off guard. I never thought someone like you had this much skill. But this works out perfectly. When a distortion occurs in the world, a probabilistic event occurs..." Hazama spoke calmly as blood poured out of him. His own defeat was probably just one of many events to him.

Jin watched him silently.

Hazama, still in an awkward posture, gave a slight bow.

"Hehehe... Well then, let's meet again in the next event, Major Jin Kisaragi."

As his glittering golden eyes looked at Jin, as if sizing him up, Hazama's body collapsed onto the wet floor like a puppet with its strings cut.

—Case 66628. Inappropriate event detected. Starting phenomenon intervention.

The system is operating normally. Event reconstruction... 3... 2... 1...

...Occurrence of probabilistic event confirmed, beginning observation.

5

When he came to, Jin was walking alone in the cathedral of the NOL's Kagutsuchi branch.

The surroundings were wrapped in a silence so piercing it was painful, and there was no sign of anyone.

In the vast, open atrium that stretched up to the high ceiling, a statue of a goddess with an open book stood, as if she alone was left behind, unable to move or disappear from here. It was a sorrowful sight.

From above the goddess statue, a white light poured into the entire cathedral. Even though the branch was deserted, the Ars Magus that controlled the lighting and air conditioning seemed to be intact, dutifully fulfilling its role without a single person to command it.

In that light that wasn't for anyone... Jin stared at something on the floor.

Lying near the tip of his blue boot was a single feather. He bent down and picked it up. It was a white feather. But as soon as Jin lifted it and placed it in his palm, the feather dissolved into the cathedral's light and disappeared.

"Tsubaki." Jin murmured in a faint voice, watching the feather vanish.

Just a moment ago, he hadn't been alone here. When he came to this cathedral, Tsubaki had appeared, and after that, he had faced Hazama. He remembered it clearly, not even questioning if it was a daydream.

But the cathedral where Jin now stood had no broken floor where the deranged Tsubaki had stood, nor any bloodstains left by Hazama.

The blood could be cleaned up. But if Ars Magus had been used to repair the broken floor, there should have been traces of it. He felt nothing of the sort. He only felt an unpleasant, clinging sense of unease.

Tsubaki and Hazama hadn't come here. That fact gave him this feeling of unease.

"It seems a phenomenon intervention occurred." A voice suddenly broke the silence. Jin was startled for a moment, but then he recognized the voice's owner and looked in that direction.

Jubei, a man in the form of a cat standing on two legs, was there. His entire body was covered in two-toned fur, white and burnt brown, and he wore a loose orange coat, giving him the appearance of a wanderer, a look that was hard to match with the pristine interior of the NOL.

However, he didn't seem to care at all, leaning his back against a pillar close to Jin as if this were a familiar place.

From his attitude, Jin understood. This beastkin, who called himself one of the Six Heroes, also knew. Just as Jin had experienced moments ago, the world was eating up many events, moving forward little by little.

"It seems so," Jin answered calmly and indifferently.

Phenomenon intervention. Hazama had used that word, too.

He understood that this was the name for this incomprehensible and unpleasant phenomenon.

It made various past events as if they never happened and began a new timeline with different events. People who died in the previous event didn't die, and mistakes that were made in the previous event didn't happen.

But most people would never even imagine that such a thing was happening. At most, the person who caused it would feel a faint sense of unease.

It's a clever trick, Jin thought with disgust.

He remembered being stabbed by Tsubaki in Ronin-Gai. That was probably one of the events that didn't happen because of an intervention.

The fact that Tsubaki's heart didn't have to be hurt in that way was a good outcome. But where did the conflict she felt then, her feelings that led her to thrust her sword, and her suffering go? Were they things that could be discarded so easily, as if they were just switching out the contents of a cup, all for someone else's convenience?

Jin clenched the hand where the feather had vanished.

"What did you see?" Jubei asked, looking at his profile. Jin replied while still looking at his clenched fist.

"I cut down Hazama."

"I see. That must have been what triggered the phenomenon intervention. To those guys, he's still a necessary pawn."

The word "guys" caught his attention, and Jin turned his whole body toward Jubei. This beastkin knew. He knew a great deal.

"Cat. How much do you know?"

Jubei didn't seem offended at being questioned with such challenging intensity. Instead, he narrowed his large red eyes and looked at Jin with what seemed to be delight.

"Let's see... I'm not old for nothing. There are still a mountain of things I know that you don't. For example..."

With a mysterious tone, Jubei pushed himself off the pillar he had been leaning against. He came right in front of Jin without a sound, looked up at his blue uniform, and gave him a knowing smirk.

"...About the Power of Order."

A wrinkle involuntarily formed between Jin's brows. *The Power of Order,* again. But this time, he didn't think it was pointless nonsense. Instead, Jin looked down disdainfully at the short Six Hero, who didn't even reach his chest.

"Hahaha, don't make such a disgusted face. I told you before. It's something you need to hear. ...Especially now, when you're starting to awaken the Power of Order." Behind his cheerful tone and demeanor, the cat's eyes took on a piercing intensity.

Jin flinched for a moment at his fearless gaze. The look that stared at him so strongly and calmly closed the distance no matter how coldly Jin tried to push him away. It was unpleasant, but the fact that it wasn't outright repulsive was also unpleasant.

"Jin, you must know it yourself. You're not the same as you were before. You must feel something, right? A kind of... desire inside you." At Jubei's prompting, Jin looked down at himself. It annoyed him that Jubei was right, but he had no choice but to agree.

There was something inside him. It was similar to a "desire" as Jubei said, but at the same time, it felt like a more supernatural "power." It was similar to how Ars Magus was used as a "system" for invisible things, but it also felt like something seared into his very core, like a "memory."

Was this the Power of Order?

It was difficult to grasp it clearly. But if what Jin was feeling now was that, it felt much more a part of him than Yukianesa's killing intent.

"Do you remember what I told you before? Power always exists in a balance with its counterpart. The Power of Order is no exception. The stronger the opposing force... or the opposing being, the more the Power of Order grows."

Order was, in other words, balance. When one thing becomes too strong, a distortion is born in the world, and because of that distortion, other distortions are born elsewhere. Things become distorted in a chain reaction, eventually twisting, cracking, and collapsing.

Order restores that broken balance and keeps things normal, and it destroys the source of the friction: "evil."

"You will always fight with power that is 'equal' to your opponent from now on. Otherwise, the Power of Order will become too strong and make things go wrong."

"Wait. So does that mean I won't be able to defeat anyone from now on?"

If so, it was a supremely annoying situation. Looking up at Jin's disgruntled face, Jubei's long whiskers twitched, and he smiled slightly.

"Don't worry, you'll win. Of course, you'll also lose. The outcome isn't just about the strength of power. What's important is the strength of your will."

"First order, now will. Hmph... what can something like that change?"

"Has nothing changed?" Jubei asked, as if to guide him, with a knowing look that said he could see right through him.

Jin's perfectly sculpted brows furrowed further. When asked that way, he couldn't help but reflect. What had he thought when he had gained this feeling Jubei called the Power of Order? Was the power of will there?

What he had been thinking of... was Tsubaki.

Before he could answer, Jubei seemed to sense Jin's thoughts and waved his long tail.

"Jin, come with me. You'll need a lot of knowledge to be able to use that Power of Order as your own."

To use power, one needs purpose. To establish one's purpose, one needs knowledge. If he were to act on what the power demanded without knowing anything, he would only be manipulated with no idea what was going on, just like with Yukianesa.

Jin was aware of that danger. More than anything, he absolutely wanted to avoid repeating that embarrassment.

But before that, there was something he had to do.

"Not now. There's a place I have to go to... something I have to do." With that, Jin looked straight at Jubei. Strangely, he felt no disgust or distrust at that moment.

He had expected to be told that he was an idiot, but Jubei simply nodded, brushing off Jin's defensive attitude.

"You're starting to adapt to the Power of Order. Do what you believe you must do. That's precisely what the Power of Order is looking for."

"No. This is *my* will," Jin returned, strongly and clearly.

Jubei looked surprised for a moment, then his catlike face broke into a deeply amused grin.

"That's right, my bad. It's *your* will. Cherish it. The strength of your will will be your greatest weapon."

It was an unpleasant feeling, as if he was being put under someone's protection. But to constantly harp on it would be like a child's tantrum and annoy him.

Jin snorted and turned his back on Jubei. As he walked away, a calm, caring voice, as if seeing him off, called out.

"Above all, don't do anything foolish. Come when you're ready. I'll teach you everything I can about the Power of Order, about the world..."

"...I'll consider it." Jin said bluntly over his shoulder, still with his back turned. Jubei tilted his whiskers forward and let out a laugh, turning lightly and leaving the cathedral.

As expected of a beastkin, his movements were fast, and his small figure vanished into the depths of the corridor in the blink of an eye.

Having inadvertently seen him off, Jin glanced at where the beastkin had disappeared and began walking.

He left the cathedral and walked up the stairs behind it. His destination was the lowest floor of this branch, the research facility deep in the underground of Kagutsuchi, where the Cauldron was.

He was going there to find his brother and kill him. And to stop Hazama's plan to use that Cauldron.

6

Moving from shadow to shadow, at a speed that would just be a passing gust of wind to a normal person, he finally reached a quiet, deserted area and let out a sigh of relief, stopping. It was in the shade of a small staircase not often used by people, though it was very close to the commercial district of the upper layer.

Anyone who would go to the trouble of slipping into such a place and hiding in the shadows of the framework to avoid being seen would probably be someone with a reason not to walk on the main street.

Jubei, who was sitting exhausted in the dead-end alley, was such a person.

"You look quite worn out."

It was only a brief moment that he had been hiding from view, but someone called out to him as he was catching his breath. He knew of the person's approach by smell before he heard the voice. Jubei looked up at the familiar voice with a wry smile.

A tall man stood, casting a long shadow into the alley where Jubei was hiding. Although a man, he was quite old; his hair, tied back, was white, and deep wrinkles were etched into his stern face.

He, too, must have followed his scent from somewhere. The well-tailored butler's suit, which blended into the scenery of the upper layers, and the white-haired man who concealed his true identity as a sturdy and strong-clawed werewolf was Valkenhayn R. Hellsing.

He was the loyal butler who served the vampire Rachel Alucard and, for Jubei, a former comrade-in-arms who received superficial praise under the same title of Six Heroes.

"You've found me in a pathetic state..."

There was no point in being pretentious with this man, so Jubei let his ears droop without pretending to be fine and looked up at the tall werewolf, who was still strong despite his age.

His old friend knelt beside him with a difficult expression. For the small beastkin, Valkenhayn, when kneeling, felt quite far away. When Jubei laughed and said this made it easier to talk, Valkenhayn responded with a reprimanding cough.

"Is this a time for jokes? ...You smell terrible." His stern face grew even more grim, and he looked at Jubei with a scolding gaze. Despite just being scolded, Jubei joked again with a short laugh.

"Do I smell that bad?"

"Yes. It's a terrible smell of blood."

At the mention of it, Jubei looked down at himself. It wasn't obvious just by looking at him sitting, but a beastkin's sense of smell couldn't be fooled. Beneath the clothes that completely covered Jubei's body, there was a deep "wound" that he shouldn't have been moving around with.

Using the smell to pinpoint the location of the wound, Valkenhayn furrowed his brow and let out a grunt.

"You're being reckless with a body like this... Take better care of yourself."

"I can't. You know what kind of situation this is, don't you?"

"Even so, if you keep this up, it will cost you your life, even as a beastkin." Valkenhayn glared at Jubei with a sharp gaze, as if asking if he truly understood. Even though he was old, the intensity of his glare was quite formidable. All Jubei could do was offer a wry smile.

But it was Valkenhayn who was having a bitter time. He knew very well that no matter how much he lectured, this short swordsman wasn't a man to listen and exercise caution. After all, they've known each other for a long time.

"Should I give you first aid?" Valkenhayn said after a few moments of hesitation, not sounding very enthusiastic.

He had a toned body and an aggressive, werewolf-like personality, but despite his looks, he was an expert in a special kind of medicine, in addition to being skilled at preparing delicious tea and pastries.

But Jubei shook his head, shrugging his shoulders.

"No, I'll pass. It feels good right after, but... after that, it's a different story. It would be a bad time to be immobile."

Jubei had experienced Valkenhayn's first aid in the past. Right after receiving the treatment, his body felt so light as if there were no wounds at all, and he could even move around more nimbly than before he was injured. But a week later, he ended up writhing in pain for an entire day as a rebound effect.

And this was a physically tough beastkin. If a normal human were to receive that treatment, they would be unable to avoid three days and three nights of intense pain.

Valkenhayn was aware of those side effects. If Jubei said he was fine, he wouldn't force him.

Instead, he asked with a stern, wary expression, "What happened? Lord Jubei, for someone of your caliber to be this injured..."

Jubei was a Six Hero and was even called the strongest living creature. It would be difficult to inflict even a minor wound on him, let alone a deep one.

The strange nature of the wound was also a concern for Valkenhayn. Typically, beastkin have far superior physical abilities and natural healing to humans. But Jubei's wound, despite being a few days old, showed no signs of healing and continued to torment his body.

Jubei's expression twisted bitterly as he placed his hand on his stomach, holding the wound.

"You probably have a hunch... but this isn't from a weapon or Ars Magus."

"Don't tell me..."

"Yeah. I was hit by magic." Valkenhayn's expression stiffened.

Magic was a technique passed down through the history of humanity, but it officially wasn't supposed to exist. It was studied, developed, and managed on a certain isolated island along with alchemy so it wouldn't mess with the world's principles or be taken outside.

But that changed with the Dark War about a hundred years ago. The organization that contained magic was disbanded, and the institution that trained mages was lost. Instead, Ars Magus became a more convenient, widespread technique... and eventually, magic was completely lost. Now it was just a relic of the past, remembered only by a few people and in books. And yet...

"Valkenhayn. The one who attacked me was undoubtedly a mage. And most likely, that mage..." He didn't want to say what came next. With that air about him, Jubei looked up at Valkenhayn and said in a heavy tone, "It was probably 'her'."

He didn't need to say the name for Valkenhayn to understand. Because besides Rachel, he could only think of one mage who could wound Jubei so deeply. And that suggested that something deeply ominous was at play.

...When she came to, she was in a deep darkness.

There was nothing. It was a bottomless darkness where she couldn't see, couldn't feel, couldn't touch anything.

It brought a maddening fear. She couldn't even see the true form of the crushing terror, and in the darkness that seemed to be fear itself, the girl was trembling all alone.

Help me.

Her plea for salvation was swallowed by the darkness and disappeared. The arms and legs that struggled to escape were also consumed by the darkness. She couldn't remember what form they had.

Or rather, what form she had?

The girl had nothing. Even if this was a delusion created by her own thoughts, it was undeniably the truth. Because even the reality that would deny it was in the darkness.

But... what was this? A single ray of light was born in the inescapable darkness.

It slowly but surely cut through the girl's darkness.

"Who... Who are you!?"

The light also felt like someone's presence. The girl asked urgently, still afraid of the darkness despite feeling the light.

A girl's voice answered, but it was a voice filled with an unparalleled nobility, a voice that carried a sense of something immeasurable.

"Pitiful child... Daughter of Izayoi, come to my side."

"Who... are you?" As the light grew, the presence and the girl's voice felt clearer.

"Have you forgotten? You exist for my sake." The light had now consumed the darkness. And because of that, it was too bright to see clearly.

But what was this overwhelming presence? She felt as though she knew it. The girl, now lost in the light, looked up at the presence she felt with her entire being and opened her mouth.

"Are you...?"

The sigh of a smile could be heard from beyond the light.

Slowly, like mist clearing, the intense light calmed itself. As one pale veil was torn away piece by piece, what lay beyond was not darkness but a world rich in color.

The blue of the sky, the green of the trees, and even the red of her own hair swaying at the edge of her vision were now clearly visible.

In the vast landscape, the girl found the person extending a hand to her.

"Tsubaki Yayoi. I will be the light that illuminates you." A deceptive, sweet voice beckoned her. In the smile directed at her, she saw love.

The girl, rescued from the darkness, dropped to her knees right there and firmly took the hand that was offered to her.

Chapter 4: Material Girl - Murakumo

1

January 4, 2200 - 14:05

When he opened his eyes and looked up, Hazama was outside the NOL's Kagutsuchi branch.

The sky was the same pale blue as it had been at noon a few hours ago. In about an hour, it would probably be tinged with the colors of sunset. At this rate, tomorrow's weather looked to be pretty good as well.

Just like the sky in the phenomenon he had observed before.

"Well, well, we're starting from here this time. It's a convenient location, so I guess I should be grateful."

He was so grateful for their consideration. Hazama spoke in a polite monologue to no one in particular, then pulled back his suit sleeve to check his wristwatch.

14:05. In the previous event, this was around the time Jin Kisaragi was facing off with Tsubaki Yayoi in the cathedral.

"Still... I never thought the Power of Order would butt in there. Hakumen-chan sure has some great timing when it comes to giving me trouble. Don't think I'm not onto you, you son of a bitch."

Hazama, the polite Intelligence Department officer, switched his expression and tone to the uncouth Terumi lurking beneath, and he let out a rough click of his tongue.

It was such a good moment, and it was ruined. To make matters worse, Jin Kisaragi's Power of Order didn't seem to be a momentary coincidence; it seemed to be fully awakened.

The Power of Order was close to the world itself. Because of this, it wasn't affected by phenomenon intervention.

"Things are getting even more troublesome. I guess I'll just have to dangle Lieutenant Tsubaki Yayoi as bait for a while... but I'll have to take care of her somewhere."

He couldn't have her meddling around later on, just like Hakumen, who had butted in by synchronizing with Jin Kisaragi's mind and shattered the Izayoi barrier.

"Oh?" He let out a small voice and touched the brim of his hat. He twisted his head around and looked behind him. From under the hat he lightly lifted, he cast a dull, fearless gaze. Did they think they were hiding their presence? He could sense prey.

"No need to be so reserved. Why don't you come out? ...It looks like I've been invited to an interesting show."

Perhaps they thought it was useless to turn back, or maybe it was out of arrogance that they could defeat him.

Behind the branch where Hazama was, at the entrance of the small plaza, a figure stepped forward with heavy footsteps.

It was Tager from Sector Seven, a man with red skin and extraordinary physique.

January 4, 2200 - 15:05

Passing by the backs of houses and climbing several sets of stairs, Noel quickly headed toward the NOL's Kagutsuchi branch.

It wasn't as intricate as the lower layer, but the upper layer was wide. Noel had come up from a place some distance from the branch, and having encountered an unexpected accident on the way, she was completely late for their 15:00 appointment.

(*It would've been nice if I could've contacted her through a communicator or something. I wonder if Makoto is already there.*)

Makoto wasn't very punctual back when they were students. She wondered how she was after joining the Intelligence Department.

In the old days, whenever they had a meeting, Noel would be a few minutes late, just barely making it, and Makoto would be a little later than her. It was a common sight for Tsubaki, who always arrived before the appointed time, to be waiting for the two of them.

(*Tsubaki...*)

Noel looked down as she ran up the stairs leading to the back of the branch.

Tsubaki wasn't at today's meeting. She wouldn't be able to meet the gentle fingertips that used to smile wryly and fix Noel's messy hair, a result of rushing, after she closed her book.

She'd tell Makoto that she met Tsubaki after they rendezvoused behind the branch. Thinking that, she took another set of stairs and chose a narrow, shadowed path to hurry along. The branch was just a little further. She should be able to see the entrance to the plaza behind the branch as soon as she rounded the corner at the end of this path.

There was just one thing on her mind. A little while ago... maybe about five minutes ago, she had heard a loud, intense noise from somewhere. She didn't know exactly where the scene was, but the direction was where she was headed- the branch.

According to Makoto's letter, the Kagutsuchi branch was still empty. If that was the case, it was unlikely that there had been a man-made accident at the branch. Was it trouble with the Ars Magus that was still active? Or was it the sound of someone fighting?

(*Could Makoto have been found...*)

An unpleasant thought popped into her head, and Noel shook her head.

(*It's- it's okay, calm down, Noel... I'm the only one being hunted by the NOL. Makoto has nothing to do with it. Even if she's found by someone from there, it shouldn't have to end in a fight...*)

But for some reason, the bad feeling wouldn't go away.

Driven by her urgency, Noel's feet unconsciously started to run at full speed, not caring about her surroundings. She rounded the corner. The plaza was right there; her vision suddenly opened up. The moment it did, the nasty smell of something burnt hit Noel's nose before she could see anything.

"Noel, don't come!" A sharp voice immediately called out to her, but Noel could only manage to stop herself from stumbling forward.

It was a small plaza, set up to be close to the back of the branch. It was circular and decorated with white stone to match the atmosphere of the branch. It was sunny, and benches were set up all around, so it was probably a place where branch personnel used to take a break.

However, that tranquil scene was absent here. The usually quiet plaza, where sunlight would shine so brightly, was now shrouded in a palpable tension, so thick you felt it would snap if you touched it.

Standing in front of Noel was Makoto, already on guard in her black poncho. Her large tail restlessly flicked back and forth as she glared at the other person in the plaza: a man in a black suit- Captain Hazama of the NOL's Intelligence Department.

His tall, lanky frame, his unnerving, plastered-on smile, and the green hair peeking out from under his black hat made Noel instinctively shiver.

The scene from that night, deep in the Kagutsuchi's underground, flashed in her mind. Hazama, transformed, had called himself Yuuki Terumi with a sadistic grin, and she had glimpsed a dark, malevolent presence within him.

"Well, well, if it isn't Second Lieutenant Noel Vermillion. I've been waiting for you, you know. I was starting to get worried since you took so long."

Hazama, who had been facing Makoto with a small sundial at the center of the plaza, turned his attention to Noel, completely unbothered by the explosive tension in the air. His long, slender foot, like a shadow, was resting on something large. It took Noel a few seconds to realize what it was, and her eyes widened in shock.

Under Hazama's foot was a person. The giant figure, with red skin and heavy mechanical parts attached, was Tager. But his brawny body was sparking and discharging electricity, as if he had short-circuited. Torn skin revealed the machinery underneath, and he no longer had the strength to knock Hazama's foot away.

"C-Captain... Hazama... why?" Noel's trembling voice asked without even thinking.

Hazama stepped over Tager, who was still pinned under his foot, and landed lightly on the ground. With his hands casually tucked into his pants pockets, he grinned.

"Why? It's obvious, isn't it? I came to pick you up. *You***,** that is."

As a member of the NOL, it was Hazama's duty to apprehend Noel, who had been charged with treason. But Noel could sense that his "pickup" wasn't standard protocol.

The desire Hazama directed toward her was much darker. Much more sinister. When Hazama took a step, Noel flinched and backed away.

"Don't come any closer! You're not laying a finger on Noel!"

With a powerful voice, Makoto rushed in between Noel and Hazama. She quickly shed her black poncho, readying herself in lighter clothing that allowed for more movement.

Hazama stopped, his mouth twisting in a look of surprise before theatrically shrugging his shoulders.

"Oh, don't make such a scary face, Lieutenant Makoto Nanaya. Besides, don't you get it? I'm technically your superior officer."

"You, my superior? Don't make me laugh! Your name wasn't in any of the city's data. I won't acknowledge someone who just popped up out of nowhere as my superior!" Makoto gazed sternly as she spoke.

She had researched him quite diligently before coming to Kagutsuchi. Usually, a person who was born, raised, and lived in this world left some kind of record somewhere. But there was no data anywhere that matched a man named Hazama who was currently a part of the Intelligence Department.

It meant the person named "Hazama" didn't exist.

At Makoto's words, Hazama's expression shifted slightly. He looked amused.

"Oh? Investigating your superior officer's personal information? That's not very becoming, is it? As expected from a beastkin. You're a vulgar animal with no decency."

Despite his feigned gentle demeanor, there was no kindness in Hazama's attitude. And even though he wasn't on guard or holding a weapon, Noel felt as if he was always aiming for her weak points.

It was a very unpleasant feeling. Noel shrank, her eyes fixed on Hazama from behind Makoto. She couldn't tear her gaze away.

Something incredibly dangerous was hiding inside or behind that man. To Noel's eyes, it was a vague, unsettling image.

"M-Makoto!" Noel's faint, timid voice escaped her, and Makoto, still focused on Hazama, replied firmly.

"It's okay. Leave this to me, Noel. Run!"

"Eh?"

"I've made arrangements with Sector Seven. If you can somehow get in touch with someone named Kokonoe, she should be able to protect you!" Makoto spoke quickly, urging Noel to flee. But before Noel could say anything, Hazama spread his arms and dramatically raised his voice.

"Sector Seven? Kokonoe? Oh, this won't do. For my subordinate, Lieutenant Nanaya, to be in contact with Sector Seven... my, this is a problem."

"Stop with the phony act. You've been monitoring my movements for a long time. You've just been letting me go along with it, haven't you?"

And knowing this, Makoto had still moved forward. She couldn't stop just because she knew she was being watched.

She also knew what would happen if she confronted Hazama in person. Dialogue was meaningless. What was needed was a clenched fist.

"Noel, run! Hurry!"

There was no time to lose. Makoto's voice was so forceful it felt as if she was physically shoving Noel.

The force of her words made Noel start to pull back, but she tightened her grip on her trembling hands and stopped her shuffling feet.

"N-No, I can't! I can't leave you behind, Makoto!"

"Noel... you don't have to worry about me!"

"I do!" Shouting as loud as she could, Noel took a deep breath and thrust both hands forward. A magic circle appeared in her palms, and from it, she pulled out two large handguns. As she held the cold, hard grips, the trembling that had consumed her body began to fade. Noel ran up next to Makoto and aimed the large barrels at Hazama. "You're my best friend, Makoto! If we're going to run, it has to be together!"

"Noel..." Makoto's eyes widened in surprise. She had always thought of Noel as someone who would be more afraid in a situation like this. Seeing the unexpected strength in Noel's face, Makoto's expression grew determined. "You're right. I'm sorry. Let's run together. And then the two of us will go get Tsubaki!"

"Yeah. We can't just leave Tsubaki behind!"

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry to interrupt this emotional moment..." Hazama watched Makoto and Noel, now standing side-by-side on guard, with an air of profound boredom. He pulled a finger from his ear and lightly adjusted his hat. Hidden in the shadow of his hat, his smile deepened.

"You're not so foolish you'd think I'll just let you go, are you?" At the same time his words registered, Hazama's body was in front of Makoto.

He closed the distance in an instant. With a light jump, his leg, bent like a whip, launched a blow at her from above.

"Gah!" Makoto used her arm and the tonfa attached to it to block the blow to her head at the last possible second.

The dull sound was probably because of the iron plates built into Hazama's shoes. After landing, he immediately swung a small, sharp butterfly knife that had appeared in his hand. The deep arc of the blade was no mere feint.

"So no mercy, huh? Bring it on!" With a sharp exhale, Makoto parried the knife strike with her tonfas and returned fire with a punch.

Even though she was a squirrel-type beastkin, she was still a beastkin. Makoto's physical abilities far surpassed those of a normal person, and her trained arm strength was a weapon in itself. She packed both speed and weight into her attack, slamming her fists and tonfas- which would normally be too heavy to swing -into Hazama.

But the punch that should've landed in an instant only grazed Hazama's shoulder as he moved sideways.

"Whoa, that was a little too close!"

"Not even close!"

The advantage of a punch is its ability to be thrown in a rapid succession. If the right is dodged, the left follows, and if the left is dodged, the right follows. She continued to strike rhythmically, either straight or in sharp upward motions.

"Whoa, whoa! Hold on, hold on!"

"Noel!"

"Right!"

As Hazama was forced to retreat from Makoto's fierce assault, Noel fired a shot from Bolverk, aiming just as he backed away. The successive Ars Magus shots exploded behind Hazama, sending him stumbling forward.

Seizing the opportunity, Makoto hit him with a full-force punch.

"Fly away!"

Her powerful straight punch hit Hazama's torso directly. The heavy impact sent his lanky body flying backward, over the collapsed Tager, and crashing into the ground beyond. The stone ground cracked where he hit, and a small cloud of dust billowed up. Hazama lay there, face up.

"Haah, haah... did we... do it?" Makoto stepped lightly and strained her eyes through the curtain of dust, still on guard and ready to attack at any moment. Noel also moved closer to Makoto, aiming her gun at Hazama.

There was no immediate reaction. But surely, it wouldn't end just like this. That suspicion welled up in both Noel and Makoto's hearts.

The silence lasted for maybe two seconds.

"Aah!"

Suddenly, something shot out from in front of them, wrapping around Noel's body and violently throwing her backward.

There was no time to resist.

Easily tossed around by whatever had entangled her, Noel slammed into the branch's wall at tremendous speed. Her vision blurred and melted into a distorted mess, and she lost consciousness.

2

Noel slowly opened her eyes to the sound of her own faint voice and a loud, violent noise that didn't seem real.

She didn't know what had happened. When she finally realized she'd been slammed into a wall, her awareness gradually returned and her vision cleared.

What she saw was the small plaza behind the branch, but it looked nothing like the one she remembered. The white, strong ground, designed to match the atmosphere of the branch, was now covered in cracks and dents, as if something had been repeatedly smashed into it.

Benches were shattered, several trees had been knocked over, and a long, black chain-like object stretched across her line of sight... a person was hanging at the end of it.

"Huh?"

Still weakly sitting on the ground, Noel slowly widened her eyes. She couldn't process what she was seeing.

But there was no mistake. The person hanging limply was Makoto.

"M-Makoto!"

Confusion instantly filled Noel's mind. What happened? What were those ominous noises she'd heard while she was unconscious?

The answers were right in front of her. She had been caught by something and thrown into a wall, losing consciousness. The dents and cracks all over the ground. The long chain and the hanging, wounded Makoto. And the man in the black suit, looking at her and smiling.

"So the princess is finally awake... I was getting so tired of waiting I was about to kill her."

The man, who had loosened his tie and had both hands in his pockets, was Hazama. But his demeanor was different from the gentle-yet-mocking attitude he had moments ago. This was crude, violent, and sadistic- a side of him Noel had seen before.

That night, in Kagutsuchi's underground. He had definitely introduced himself as...

"Yu- Yuuki Terumi..."

He was the one who had done that to Makoto. The thought sent a jolt through Noel, and she instinctively grabbed her Bolverk guns. But as Noel tried to stand, Hazama- Terumi- firmly stopped her.

"Whoa, whoa! Don't you make any careless moves! I might accidentally drop her."

The word "drop" instantly made the blood drain from Noel's face.

Of course, she knew. She could see it.

A long, black chain, as if it had torn through space, was tightly restraining Makoto and holding her suspended. There was nothing beneath her feet- only empty air.

The black chain with a serpent's head, Terumi's phenomenon weapon Ouroboros, was dangling Makoto over an empty void.

"Even a durable beastkin like her can't survive a fall from this height. What do you say? Shall we try dropping her? If she falls, well, that's the end of that! Hyahahaha!" Terumi laughed gleefully and playfully kicked the chain. Makoto swung wildly at the end of it, her large, limp tail swaying like a pendulum.

"No! Stop it! Put Makoto down!"

A sharp, dusty wind whipped through the plaza.

This was the top layer of a Hierarchical City. People didn't usually think about the altitude because the idea of falling from the city itself was unthinkable. What would happen if someone fell from this height? The obvious answer was too gruesome to imagine.

"'Stop it,' eh?" Terumi responded to Noel's scream with a contemptuous voice and expression. The golden eyes under his hat gleamed with cruelty, and he pulled back his lips into a deep grin. "Come on, Noel-chan. You don't know how to beg like a dog, do you? Is that how you ask someone for a favor?"

"Pl-please, I beg you..."

"I can't hear you!" Terumi roughly yelled, cutting off Noel's voice as she trembled with overflowing tears. At the same time, the chain tightened its grip on Makoto's body, as if to crush her bones and organs.

"Augh... ghh..."

Makoto let out a faint moan. She was still alive.

Terumi's sadistic smile deepened further.

"Oh, what a beastkin. What remarkable vitality, so tenacious. How about I make you hear a more dramatic scream? That'll help you understand the situation you're in, won't it?"

The chain tightened around its prey with a grating noise. Makoto's already fading consciousness had no strength left to resist her binds. Her trained, toned body groaned and contorted, and then something seemed to give way. Makoto coughed up blood.

"No! Stop! Please, stop it! I'll do anything, anything you want! Just don't hurt Makoto anymore!" Noel screamed until her throat was raw. Besides the physical pain, her body trembled from the horrific sight in front of her, preventing her from standing. She could only sit there weakly, watching her best friend's pathetic form suspended over the void just in front of her.

"'Anything,' huh. Heh, that's a touching offer. But what could you possibly do, you worthless doll?" He laughed derisively and began to saunter toward Noel.

Terumi looked down at Noel, who was on her hands and knees with a tear-stained face, as if she were a pathetic thing. A grotesque smile etched onto his face.

"Do you seriously not get it? Whose fault is it that this damn beastkin is suffering like this? It's *your* fault, Noel Vermillion!"

The unexpected words froze Noel's expression. What was this man saying? She stared blankly, unable to comprehend.

"M-my fault?"

"Noel... don't... listen to him!" Makoto barely managed to squeeze out a voice that was on the verge of fading, as if trying to intervene between Noel and Terumi.

Terumi scoffed and shot a disdainful glance at the moaning Makoto. Ouroboros tightened its grip on Makoto, making a disgusting sound. Amidst a silent scream, it sounded like something broke.

"Ah, ugh..."

A muffled grunt escaped her lips, and that was the last of Makoto's consciousness. Her head lolled, her neck broken. Her completely limp body looked as if the life had drained from it. A cold sweat broke out all over Noel as she stared at the sight.

Noel choked on her gasping breath, her teeth chattering uncontrollably as she stared wide-eyed at the unconscious Makoto. Terumi spoke to her with a mix of mockery and pity.

"That's right, it's your fault. The fact that you exist in this world has warped this damn beastkin and that pathetic little Tsubaki-chan. Why, you ask? Because you were never supposed to exist in this world! The very fact that you 'exist' has warped the world from the start!"

You weren't supposed to exist here.

Tsubaki's words echoed in Noel's mind, piercing her.

If Noel hadn't been here, Tsubaki would've been Jin's secretary. She wouldn't have to bear the heavy burden of being a Wing of Justice or wear that white uniform.

Noel's gaze was fixed on Makoto, unable to look away.

If Noel hadn't been here, Makoto wouldn't have had to suffer like this. She wouldn't have had to run around for Noel's sake or betray the Intelligence Department, the one she had wanted to join since she was a student.

Her body felt cold, and the trembling wouldn't stop. She couldn't feel her hands on the ground, yet her thoughts raced on, refusing to stop.

What if she hadn't been here? The hypothesis wouldn't go away.

Terumi roughly grabbed Noel's chin, which had gone pale, and pulled it up. He peered into Noel's green eyes, his golden eyes filled with ridicule. He raised his hand, obstructing her vision.

"Observe well... You should be able to see it, little Observer!"

Just like pulling a trigger, something in Noel's nerves switched on. Under Terumi's gaze, Noel's eye color began to change. The soft green of a new leaf became a deep, clear blue. And with those eyes, Noel saw.

A time that wasn't now, a world that wasn't here. The sky was blue, the trees were a thin green, the air was full of seithr, and humanity lived in Hierarchical Cities built all over the world. Everything was the same as the world Noel knew. People she knew were there, and people she didn't know were there.

Tsubaki was smiling. Jin was next to her. Makoto's eyes were shining. She was in the wide world.

But Noel wasn't there.

"What... was supposed to happen to me? Was I... supposed to die in the Ibukido accident?"

With her blue eyes wide open, still staring at the world without her, Noel asked the question into the empty space. Terumi's voice answered, crushing her hope.

"Die? Don't act human, doll. You don't 'die,' you *'break.'"*

"Break?"

"What, you still haven't figured it out? If you don't want to accept it, I'll kindly tell you! You're not human. You're the 12th Prime Field Device, a Prime Field created for the Boundary Interfacing Experiment that was supposed to be used in the exploded lab... Mu-12!"

The 12th Prime Field Device. What that meant was obvious.

Noel was the Successor of the Azure. Her eyes simply and purely observed everything that existed.

When she looked at herself, Noel could see what she was. The 12th Prime Field Device, created for an experiment to contact the Boundary. A moving doll, created by human hands.

"I... I...!"

Everything she saw betrayed the world Noel had believed in until now. The self that had always existed was not supposed to be here. The person she thought was Noel was not.

Moreover, she recognized this unbelievable, unheard-of story as the truth.

"Are you starting to get it? That's right, everything you believed to be the world is a lie! It's a fake, a flawed product born from a doll that shouldn't be alive!"

Terumi spread his arms wide. He was showing her that this world, everything in it, was a mistake created because of her. Terumi's triumphant laughter echoed in Noel's head.

"Now, look closely. Stare at the truth. And despair! This is the truth of your world!"

"Eh..." Noel let out a sound, and for a moment, she felt like her body was floating.

But it wasn't Noel who was floating. It was Makoto. For a moment, she was suspended... and then she fell. Her body covered in wounds, her eyelids closed in unconsciousness, her soft hair whipped by the wind- she vanished from Noel's sight in an instant.

"N-no! Nooo! Makoto, Maakotooo!" Noel cried out in a thin wail, crawling toward the edge of the plaza, too panicked to stand. Her feet stumbled in complete fear, but she still clung to the wall and peered down from where Makoto had been hanging.

It was a terrifyingly high drop, so high she couldn't even see the ground. She could see the lower layers of the city piled on top of each other. But there was no sign of Makoto anywhere. Had she been swallowed by the far distance, lost in the haze of clouds and seithr?

Next to Noel, who trembled and cried in terror and confusion, Terumi nonchalantly peered over the edge.

"Whoa, even a beastkin wouldn't survive a fall from this height." He spoke as if he had just dropped a piece of trash.

Noel turned to him, her eyes filled with a hatred she had never felt before.

"Yuuki Terumi... I will never forgive you! Never!"

She summoned her Bolverk guns into her outstretched hands and aimed them at the man she hated. She glared at him with all her rage, wanting to obliterate him with her gaze alone.

"That's right... that's right, hate me! More, more! Hate me, hate me, HATE ME!"

Light gathered at the muzzle of the Bolverk. It was a maximum output Ars Magus, incomparable to any she had fired before. Terumi threw his arms wide, as if to embrace the attack.

"Heeheehee, that's it, that's it, Noel Vermillion! Now pull the trigger! Unleash your hatred on me! And take off that limiter!"

"AAAAAAAHHHHHH!" Noel's finger tightened on Bolverk's trigger, pulling the small piece of metal with pure rage.

The Ars Magus, now a gigantic light, fired, blowing Terumi away. At the same time, something snapped inside Noel.

Suddenly, a shockwave surged from within Noel, her body tensing and arching back, still clutching Bolverk. Her eyes stared ahead, unable to close. The color of her irises changed to blue.

"A... ah... ah... ah..." Her throat trembled, letting out a meaningless sound.

What overflowed from behind the snapped restraint was pure hatred.

In response to the endless hatred welling up inside her, something flowed through Noel with the force of a raging river.

It was memory. Noel's memory. When she was much younger and had just entered the military academy, the timid Noel was often bullied. People said terrible things to her, treated her coldly, and blamed her for no reason. She hated people because they always hurt her.

Along with her own, someone else's memories also poured in. Unknown scenes flashed in her mind: a cold room filled with machinery, a cold glass case that trapped her.

These were the memories of many young girls. Girls... Prime Fields who were created, just like Noel. They were victims of cruel experiments, unable to move on their own.

It was painful. It was agonizing, terrifying. She hated it! Hated, hated, hated so much it was unbearable.

She wished this entire world would break.

(This world...)

A single, transparent tear fell from the corner of Noel's eye and disappeared.

She didn't want to be in this kind of world. She didn't want to accept this kind of world.

A world where those close to her cried. A world where those important to her were hurt. A world where she lost everything she held dear.

(I don't need any of it... I don't need any of it!)

She hated it. She hated the world itself for being so heartless, cruel, and horrible. Most of all, she hated herself for being the very distortion that created this world.

"Hate... hate, hate, hate, hate!" With her words, her hatred overflowed from her entire being. The hatred that spilled out transformed into large wings that spread out behind Noel.

"I don't need a world like this!"

As Noel said that, the wings enveloped her all at once, trapping her and swallowing the girl with the blue eyes. It was like a giant cocoon. A beautiful, grand, yet eerie and bizarre, spherical egg made of countless overlapping wings.

Looking up at it, Terumi laughed out loud all by himself.

"Kukukuku... That's everything. All the pieces are in place! Are you observing, Master Unit Amaterasu?! Come on, try and stop me if you can! HYAHAHAHAHAHAHA!"

Terumi's unsettling laughter filled the air as he looked up at the towering branch building. The next moment, he and the gigantic cocoon vanished from the spot.

3

Like a sigh from a young girl, the scent of roses drifted by, and then small feet landed silently on the white stone ground. It was a fantastical and mysterious scene, like something out of a fairy tale. But unfortunately, there were no lucky spectators there.

It was an empty, small plaza. It was located right behind the NOL's Kagutsuchi branch and was once a place of relaxation for the employees and soldiers.

But now there was no sign of that. The plaza was covered in cracks and dents, as if something had violently struck the ground, and the carefully manicured plants were toppled and crushed. This was the very plaza where Hazama and Noel had been just over ten minutes ago.

"Their presence remains. Which means they're already..."

Walking across the now uneven plaza, Rachel, the girl who had appeared with the scent of roses, looked around. She had a good idea of what had happened here.

It was a complex, multi-layered web of events. In this particular web, Hazama- no, Terumi -had chosen the quickest way to get his hands on Noel Vermillion.

It seemed Takamagahara and Terumi were seriously observing every event and picking out the most convenient outcome for themselves. It was an insane method that required extreme patience.

As the wind stirred her long blonde hair like ribbons, Rachel's gaze glided upward, following the Kagutsuchi branch to its rooftop. Her crimson eyes clouded with unease.

"The refinement has already begun. This is... not good."

"Indeed. It seems this endeavor will be in vain, Rachel Alucard." Ethereal and sweet, the voice spoke abruptly from right behind Rachel.

Rachel uncharacteristically spun around, her long hair fluttering. She hadn't noticed their arrival or approach at all. She spun around and was surprised once more.

"You..."

The person there was a young girl. She seemed to be in that period of life where innocence suited her more than charm, with a faint hint of youthfulness still remaining. But that was only her physique. Just as Rachel, in her young girl's form, possessed an enchanting beauty that exceeded human intellect, this girl also had an otherworldly dignity.

"Why are you here?"

Despite Rachel's bitter tone, the girl's posture didn't waver. Not her stance, not her gaze, and not the words she spoke- there was no emotion in any of it.

"Know your place, vampire. You have meddled too much. A bystander should act like a bystander and quietly remain in the audience."

"I'm afraid not. It's my choice where I enjoy the show."

"I told you to know your place."

The girl, with a haughtiness that belied her youthful appearance, spoke to the elegantly defiant Rachel, as if to say that no dissent would be tolerated. Her cold, almost vacant eyes narrowed slightly as if to form a smile.

"Do not fret. I have prepared a fitting seat for you."

As if on cue, another presence appeared behind Rachel. It was a shimmering, shadow-like figure. Its bizarre silhouette, which was both humanoid and not, silently and instantly activated a magic circle.

Rachel's eyes widened in surprise.

The shadow wasn't using Ars Magus. It was magic. Why could this shadow control such a difficult and advanced form of magic as teleportation?

Interrupting her questions, a dark band of light shot out from the shadow and caught Rachel.

"Ugh..."

There was no time for teleportation magic. As Rachel let out a small groan, the shadow cast another spell.

What incredible precision and speed in its spell composition. Though surprised, Rachel reacted instantly.

"Gii!" She called out a name sharply, and without waiting for a reply, she teleported her small, red familiar, who had been huddled beside her. Right after that, the magic from the shadow created a large magic circle behind the restrained vampire girl. The bands of light, which held her tiny arms and legs, pressed their captive against the magic circle, crucifying her.

She couldn't move, and she couldn't even teleport. It would be a lie to say she hadn't let her guard down. The result was incredibly frustrating.

"This is... quite forceful, isn't it?" Rachel's perfectly shaped eyebrows furrowed slightly as she looked at the shimmering shadow and the girl who commanded it.

The girl looked at Rachel with a dark gaze and told her coldly, "It is a seat that suits you. Relax and enjoy the show."

Behind Rachel, space tore open. This was the effect of the second spell the shadow had cast.

A seal between dimensions.

Soon after, Rachel's form vanished from the damaged plaza, and the torn space closed firmly behind her.

January 4, 2200 - 16:30

The moment he stepped into the Novus Orbis Librarium's Kagutsuchi branch, Ragna was struck with an indescribable sense of urgency.

He had a bad feeling. No, he felt like something terrible was actually happening somewhere. It was similar to the feeling of an unexplained alarm going off, a frantic sense of urgency without knowing why.

He knew where he needed to go. Up. He ran through the hallways and up the stairs, then took a luxurious elevator to the top floor, but he still needed to go higher.

He pried open a sturdy door at the end of the corridor and ran up a long staircase that led to the top. He slammed through the final door and jumped inside.

A roaring wind filled Ragna's vision, along with the orange sky painted by the sunset.

"Where... is this?" Caught off guard by the unexpected location and the powerful wind, Ragna stopped and shielded his face.

It was the rooftop. The very top of the Kagutsuchi branch. It was clear this wasn't an area open to the public; there were no handrails to prevent falling, just a flat, circular floor that looked easy to slip on.

However, in the back of the roof, something bizarre stood. A massive black slab, and a spherical object floating above it. Against the backdrop of the sunset sky, they stood still, as if sleeping.

A man was standing there, looking up at the slab and the sphere. A tall, lanky man in a black suit. The same person who was Hazama of the NOL's Intelligence Department and the shadow lurking within him, Yuuki Terumi.

"Yuuki Terumi!"

The moment he saw the man, Ragna's hostility flared up like bared fangs. He snarled like a beast about to lunge and drew his sword. The man in the suit, Hazama, adjusted his hat and turned to face him.

"Welcome, Ragna the Bloodedge. Oh, I'm so glad you came. I was worried I'd be the only one to witness this grand show."

"A show? I'll start the show by tearing you limb from limb right now."

Ragna had no intention of wasting time with small talk. He readied his oversized sword, prepared to attack immediately. Hazama, or Terumi, grinned, lowering his chin while still holding his hat.

"So violent. Don't be in such a hurry; I'll get to play with you later. For now, take a look. How is it? It's well-made, isn't it?"

With that, Hazama stepped aside and gestured for Ragna to look at what was behind him. Still on guard, Ragna looked up at the same objects Hazama was watching- the black slab and the floating sphere that had caught his eye when he first arrived on the roof.

The more he looked, the more enormous and eerie the objects became.

The slab had an incredibly smooth surface but was completely devoid of any polish. It was as if a deep darkness had been collected and compressed into the shape of a slab. The sphere floating above it with no visible support was the opposite- white and formed from what looked like countless folded wings. It looked like an egg or a cocoon.

Just looking at it made Ragna feel nauseous. A strange chill crawled up his spine and slowly went down his back. At the same time, he was hit with a bad sense of deja vu. He'd felt this same discomfort before when looking at something like this slab. And he felt like he had seen the winged, cocoon-like object somewhere before.

"Wha... no way... that thing is..."

The sudden realization of what he was seeing made Ragna's eyes widen. It was hard to believe. But once the thought entered his mind, he couldn't consider any other possibility.

"Oh, you've figured it out? I guess you haven't been traveling the world for nothing. Yes, that's right. This is a 'Cauldron.'"

Ragna heard Hazama's words with a surprising calmness.

Yes, this feeling was from the Cauldron. The shape of the stacked wings resembled the lid that sealed the entrance to the Cauldron found deep beneath Kagutsuchi and other Hierarchical Cities.

A Cauldron is a gateway that connects the current world to the Boundary, another dimension closely tied to it. However, even if it didn't have the shape of a hole, as its common name suggests, it didn't lose its function as a Cauldron.

For example, there was the Azure Grimoire, Ragna's right arm- the strongest and original grimoire. It was made of highly condensed seithr, and through this compression, it could connect to the Boundary. In other words, it was a small Cauldron.

If this slab was also a Cauldron, its material was also highly condensed seithr. But where did the energy come from to create something so massive?

Ragna frowned in confusion, but then he gasped. He had always felt something was off, but he had dismissed it as not being related to Terumi and the Prime Fields.

When he first arrived, the Kagutsuchi branch was completely empty. There was no sign of an attack or a fight. It was as if everyone had vanished, sucked away by something.

This meant...

"You... you used the Kagutsuchi's soldiers as material for this thing, didn't you?!"

Ragna didn't know the logic behind converting humans into a mass of seithr, but he knew that a mass of seithr could turn into a human arm. The reverse wasn't impossible.

Hazama just moved his eyes to look at Ragna and pulled up the corners of his mouth into a smile.

"My, you're unusually perceptive. *Clap, clap.* Oh yes, everyone was so useful. This is a large branch of a Hierarchical City after all. There were so many soldiers working here. We were able to get it up and running much faster than I expected."

"You gotta be kidding me..." Ragna spat out the words in disgust. He himself had cut down countless NOL soldiers. He felt no sympathy for them. But the fact that Hazama could forcefully strip them of their humanity and use them as material for this strange object was sickening.

"What do you want this thing for?!"

"What for? Oh, don't be so silly. The answer is obvious." Hazama lightly laughed off Ragna's question. After a single blink, his golden eyes gleamed with a cold cruelty. "*For refining a Prime Field*."

The ominous, low voice.

The words made Ragna's face tighten. He looked up at the slab in horror.

By being refined inside a Cauldron, a Boundary Interface Prime Field would be refined into a new phenomenon weapon, Lux Sanctus: Murakumo. The 13th Prime Field, Nu, was being refined in the Cauldron beneath Kagutsuchi to awaken as the Murakumo Unit.

But after her fight with Ragna, the awakened Murakumo Unit, Nu, fell into the Cauldron and was lost. The 11th Prime Field, Lambda, was in Kokonoe's possession.

So which Prime Field was Hazama trying to refine in this Cauldron? The answer was obvious. Even Kokonoe had been worried about it.

We have to get Noel Vermillion before Terumi does...

Ragna took a sharp, thin breath as he stared at the slab. He had a bad feeling. He had felt it all along. It was like his heart was being squeezed by a feeling of nausea. He finally realized the reason. This Cauldron, standing so silently...

"The Cauldron... it's active." The towering black Cauldron was operating silently. It was refining. Inside, it had swallowed not the 13th or 11th Prime Field, but the 12th- Noel Vermillion.

"Don't screw with me!" Ragna's strained breath turned into an explosive roar, and he ran forward. His eyes were fixed on the looming monolith. If that was a Cauldron and Noel was inside, he absolutely couldn't let the refinement happen. He didn't know how to stop it, but he was going to destroy it and drag the girl out.

"Yaaah!"

He swung his sword high and brought it down with all his might. But his blade was blocked by an invisible barrier just before it reached the slab, and the impact sent Ragna flying back to where he started, as if he had been hit by a bolt of lightning.

Thrown helplessly to the ground, Ragna took a hard fall. But he immediately got up without a second thought.

"Damn it... what's going on?!"

His attacks weren't just ineffective; they couldn't even reach it. From the side of the slab, a mocking laugh came from the infuriated Ragna.

"Heeheehee! Useless, useless, useless! It's useless, Ragna-chan! If a Cauldron could be damaged by you screwing around, there'd be no point in building it in a place like this, you idiot!"

Ragna glared at Terumi, who was leaning forward and sticking his neck out to taunt him, his gaze like that of a beast ready to bite. But even Ragna's glare seemed to entertain Terumi. He couldn't contain his amusement. He shook his shoulders, laughing menacingly.

"Besides, I personally made this one for the special purpose of being a Godslayer."

Godslayer. The word was absurd but also incredibly ominous. Ragna's eyebrows furrowed in suspicion, not anger.

"What are you planning to do?"

It didn't sound like he was joking or speaking in a metaphor. So what was the "god" Terumi was referring to? Terumi plastered a snake-like smirk on his face and slowly and dramatically adjusted his hat.

"I just said it. To slay a god."

Whatever he found so amusing in those words, Terumi clicked his tongue and let out a low, guttural laugh. He nonchalantly slipped his hands into his pockets, standing casually in a way that didn't suggest he was facing an armed opponent. He began to speak as if telling a story from long ago.

"A long, long time ago, humanity discovered the 'Boundary' and a hole connected to it- a 'Cauldron.' When they entered the Boundary through the Cauldron, they found a space filled with 'seithr.' Now, Ragna-chan, here's a quiz. What is seithr?"

"Wha-?"

"Three, two, one, time's up!" Terumi gleefully mocked Ragna, who was too stunned to speak.

Ragna frowned, irritated, but he swallowed his retort, not wanting to prolong the conversation. Terumi watched him, then raised a hand, palm up, in front of his face. It was as if he was pointing to the air around him, and to the faint seithr mixed in with the air due to the high altitude.

"Seithr is a particle program. It's existed in this world since ancient times and is the substance that makes up everything in it. The humans who peeked into the Boundary through the Cauldron discovered a being that could freely manipulate this seithr. That was the Master Unit... a god!"

Ragna unconsciously swallowed.

If everything was made of seithr, being able to freely manipulate it was almost the same as manipulating the world itself. That would indeed be worthy of the name "god."

"Humanity craved the god's power. So they created Boundary Interface Prime Field Devices and made contact with the Master Unit."

The experiment of contacting the Master Unit was a success. The Prime Field returned with a massive amount of data, but at the same time, by making contact with the Master Unit, it gained the power to freely rewrite events... the "power of the Eye."

"It's a terrifying power, isn't it? You can rewrite reality to your convenience. Naturally, humanity was scared of this, so they threw the Prime Field back into the Boundary. But they kept the data. Based on the leftover data from that Prime Field, humanity finally created the 'power of the Eye'

artificially. To control events themselves by using a god's power. That was... the Takamagahara System."

The Takamagahara System observes and adjusts humanity, the world, and all events. This is so the world of humanity will exist for eternity, no matter what distortions may arise. The result was the "repeated world" that had been occurring until a few days ago.

Terumi shrugged his shoulders slightly, scoffing.

"Do you understand? Humans created a god, but the world doesn't need two gods to manipulate events, right? Of course, the Takamagahara System came to the same conclusion."

In other words, they aimed to destroy the other god, the Master Unit.

"To kill a god, you need a weapon. The Boundary Interface Prime Field Devices were chosen as the material. They were created for the sole purpose of entering the Boundary. By refining them in a Cauldron and giving them enough destructive power, they become a weapon. So..."

Stopping there, Terumi suddenly turned around and looked at the looming black slab and the cocoon above it. As if waiting for that exact moment, a sound like a throbbing heartbeat could be heard.

Ragna gasped and looked up.

Was it triggered by that large pulse? Several lines of blue light ran across the surface of the completely black slab, and a crest appeared at the end of them. The blue lines and the crest flickered gently. The rhythmic, soft pulsing resembled the peaceful breath or heartbeat of someone in a deep sleep.

Terumi spread his arms wide and loudly declared, "It's about to be born! Come on, the show's about to begin, Ragna-chan... the awakening of Murakumo!"

Did he hear his voice vibrate in the air? The gentle flickering of the slab slowly grew stronger, as if waking from a deep sleep. Or to use Terumi's words, as if awakening.

From inside the giant, floating white sphere- the winged egg -a thin, white light began to seep out. The single line of light quickly became three, and soon became countless.

"This world is full of lies, lies, lies, lies, lies! Everything is a fabricated lie! So I'll show you the truth called despair!" Terumi's voice echoed across the rooftop.

Another loud pulse sounded. It shook the air even more than Terumi's voice and delivered a heavy impact.

The light grew stronger. The sealed wings were slowly beginning to open.

Ragna raised his hand, creating a shadow to block the blinding light, but he couldn't move. He could only watch. He couldn't do anything else. He couldn't stop it.

"In the name of Susano'o, I command you! Awaken, Murakumo... no, the Sword of the Godslayer, Kusanagi! Cut down all the lies with your blade!"

Terumi's words, delivered as if to challenge her, were a song of awakening and a spell of liberation. The countless wings that made up the cocoon moved gently all at once, as if taking and releasing a deep breath. With another exhale, as if a flower was blossoming... they slowly opened.

The overflowing light was almost drowning. From within the light, a human figure descended. It was a girl.

At first, she was curled up like a fetus, but as she descended, her posture straightened. With her chest-length cape fluttering wildly in the wind, the girl landed silently and gracefully in front of Ragna.

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When Ragna saw her, he felt like he had been bludgeoned over the head.

The girl who emerged from the cocoon wore a form-fitting white outfit under her white cape. It was a revealing costume, but despite the softness of her exposed skin, it gave her a terribly inorganic impression. She wore a large headgear with the number 12 engraved in its center, as well as on a piece on her chest.

Her appearance was too close to the other Prime Field Devices Ragna had seen.

She was a Prime Field Device. But at the same time, her golden hair fluttering in the sunset wind, her thin shoulders, and her small head, along with her fair-skinned face that always looked so troubled, were undoubtedly Noel Vermillion.

"Is that... Noel?" Ragna asked blankly, his sword hanging loosely in his left hand despite his intent to attack.

He had already known since yesterday that Noel was a Prime Field. But to see her appear in the form of one felt like a final, decisive blow.

Noel stood silently, staring into nothingness, her eyes void of any will or emotion. Her appearance made Ragna frown. Her eye color was different. Noel's eyes were a gentle green. Now they were a disturbingly clear blue.

With Ragna unable to move forward, he watched as Noel's body was roughly swept into a bridal carry. Terumi had grabbed her, running his bony hand along her white cheek, as if to show off to Ragna.

"Oh, it turned out cute, didn't it? It's the best sword... and now it's mine, kukuku. This feeling... it's just like your little sister, huh? Hyahahaha!"

"You... you bastard!"

Ragna felt his emotions run wild. Driven by rage, he brought his sword down, intending to cut between Terumi and Noel.

But his enraged slash was stopped by a metallic sound.

Ragna's attack had been blocked by a blade of light that had shot out from a tear in space. It had been launched by Noel, who stood emotionless, her hand thrust forward.

"Damn it... get a hold of yourself, Noel!"

"Kukukuku, good, good, well done. Hey, Kusanagi. You go to the Cauldron first." Throwing a sarcastic glance at Ragna, who was forced to keep his distance, Terumi leaned in and spoke into Noel's ear. "And go kill the Master Unit... kill Amaterasu!"

Noel's expression didn't change at Terumi's close proximity or his command. She simply responded in a flat, emotionless voice.

"Acknowledged."

Along with her reply, a white magic circle appeared at her feet, and Noel's body slowly began to sink into it, starting from her toes.

He couldn't let her go. Ragna's instincts screamed at him, and he slammed his foot into the ground.

"Wait! Don't go, Noel!"

A chain with a serpent's head shot out, grabbed Ragna's outstretched arm as he tried to pull her back, and slammed him to the ground. It was Terumi's Ouroboros. The serpent's head bit into his arm, pinning him to the ground, not even allowing him to get up.

"Gah, let me go! Hey, Noel! I said don't go!"

"Bark, bark, bark, shut up, little puppy!" With the corners of his mouth still drawn into a sneer, Terumi waved his arm as if to swat away Ragna's voice. At the same time, he threw a slender knife, pinning Ragna's other shoulder to the ground.

"Agh... damn..."

The knife had pierced the arm opposite the one being held down by Ouroboros. Neither hand could pull out the knife, which had torn through the flesh and pierced his clothes. Helplessly pinned to the floor, Ragna watched as Noel completely vanished into the magic circle.

Once the magic circle also dissolved into particles of light and vanished, Terumi grabbed the chain, which was now dangling in empty space, and pulled it back, freeing Ragna's arm.

"Terumi!"

Ragna immediately pulled the knife out of his shoulder, threw it away, and scrambled to his feet. The knife bounced on the floor with a cheap clatter.

He wanted to punch this man in the face right away. But he knew there was something he had to do first, and without a moment's hesitation, Ragna turned on his heel.

He ran, grabbing his sword from where it had been knocked away. Just as he was about to head for the door leading out of the rooftop, a serpent's head flew at him.

The serpent's head, attached to a black chain, bit into space and swiftly carried its master. Terumi, who had flown over Ragna's head, suddenly twisted his body mid-air and delivered a whip-like kick.

"Guh!"

Terumi's long limbs made distance deceptive. Ragna blocked the unexpectedly close kick with his arm just in time, and in return, he swung his sword in a vertical slash. The attack missed Terumi, who had released a black, shadow-like figure that blocked and pushed it away.

"Oh, Ragna-chan, where are you going, ignoring me?" Terumi casually stood in Ragna's way, a smug, provoking grin on his face.

Ragna clicked his tongue and readied himself. He was in a hurry. He didn't have time for this man.

"It's obvious! I'm going to stop Noel. Get out of my way!"

"Noel, Noel, Noel! I know you're shocked that your beloved girlfriend dumped you, but she's not Noel Vermillion anymore. She's the 12th Prime Field Device... the Sword of the Godslayer, Kusanagi! She's a slave who faithfully follows my orders, a crazy doll that can think of nothing but destroying the world!"

"Shut up!" Ragna shouted roughly to drown out Terumi's attempts to provoke him. Just looking at this man felt mind was on fire. He could feel his anger and hatred piling up. He gritted his teeth and angrily tightened his grip on his sword. "What do you mean, a doll?! You're the one who turned her into this! You and the others!"

"So what? She was born to be refined into Kusanagi in the first place. I gave a worthless, failed piece of junk a reason to exist! Shouldn't you be thanking me? The cute doll made from your little sister just received a spectacular promotion! Hyahahahaha!"

"I told you to shut up!"

The anger boiling in his stomach overflowed from his mouth, making his throat tremble. He stepped forward and swung his sword in a horizontal sweep.

"Whoa!" Terumi flew high, pulled by the chain he had thrown into the air. But another chain was immediately released, and Terumi instantly returned to Ragna's face. He landed in a low crouch, a sadistic grin on his face. He quickly pulled out two knives and slashed in an arc.

"Come on!"

"Guh!"

A sense of danger flashed through Ragna, and he pulled back quickly. But he still took shallow hits on his left and right sides.

The tip of a light blade came up from below once more, grazing his cheek. A single red drop of blood flew into Ragna's vision.

Ragna forcefully kicked Terumi to create some distance, but immediately drew his sword and took a stance.

Distance was meaningless against this man. Just as he expected, Hazama jumped at him, bringing a knife down from the air. Ragna blocked it with the flat of his sword.

"Come on, come on, come on! What's wrong?! You're not even putting up a fight!"

"I'm not going to play with you!"

Ragna forcefully pushed back against the rapid succession of knife swings, as if he was trying to turn Terumi into charcoal. He gripped his sword with both hands and brought it down with a heavy gust of wind.

Terumi escaped again with his chain. The tip of Ragna's blade fell just short. But he was so close. He refused to let it end here and stepped forward, thrusting the sword again, this time to gouge from below.

"Gah!"

Ragna's upward swing failed to reach, but the darkness that surged from his right arm- the Azure Grimoire -diagonally slashed across Terumi's torso. Terumi's body was sent flying, having misjudged the distance. Ragna followed by kicking off the ground, swinging his sword as he jumped into the air.

A heavy impact, more of a slam than a slash, sent Terumi crashing into the hard ground. His skinny body, so unlike a soldier's, bounced dully on the flat roof, but he suddenly regained his footing in midair.

"Don't mess with me, you damn brat!"

Even before he landed, a chain shot out from Terumi's side, heading for Ragna. It wasn't a serpent's head, but a chain with a knife attached. Ragna parried it with his sword, and a shower of sparks flew.

Then another chain, this time the serpent's head he was now more familiar with, lunged at him. He knocked it away the same way. But this time the serpent's head latched onto Ragna's wildly swung sword.

"What!?"

By the time he realized it, he was pulled hard, losing his balance. Terumi lunged at him, pulled by the chain.

Ragna didn't have time to dodge. He braced himself to guard, but Terumi slipped low and slashed at his legs. The knife cut below his knee as he tried to stop himself from stumbling. The fresh pain dulled Ragna's reaction, and Terumi's knee plunged into his side.

"Gah!"

As Ragna tried to get up, a thin knife was plunged into his already-injured shoulder. With the knife twisted into his flesh, a black-suited foot flew into the air. The hard toe of the shoe pierced the side of Ragna's head.

It felt like a stake had been driven into his skull. Unable to brace himself, Ragna's body tilted backward. Terumi casually grabbed him by the chest, tripped him, and slammed him into the ground.

"Agh!"

The hard impact to his back knocked all the air out of his lungs. He coughed reflexively and put his hands down, trying to get up, but a hard leather shoe came down on his shoulder, pinning him to the cold floor.

"Guh... Terumi!"

"What's wrong, Ragna-chan? I thought you'd have grown up a little, but you're still so weak. What a serious letdown. How boring." Terumi looked down at Ragna, grinding his toe into the shoulder that was pinned to the ground.

"Gaaah! Aah!"

His bones creaked, and his joints felt like they were about to break. As Ragna's face twisted in agony, the mockery on Terumi's face vanished, replaced by a slight grin, as if he had found a new toy.

"What, does it hurt? Are you gonna cry? Heh, looking at you like this, groveling on the ground... it reminds me of that time. When I burned down that miserable church, killed that annoying old hag... and took your little brother and sister. You were just licking the ground then, too!"

As he spoke, Terumi repeatedly kicked Ragna's shoulder with his heel. But Ragna didn't feel the pain. His face, with his eyebrows furrowed and the corners of his eyes lifted like an animal's, not twisted in agony but in a boundless rage that swallowed all the pain.

"I'll never... forgive you...!"

"Ha! 'I'll never forgive you'? Don't get so cocky. A weakling like you deserves to be trampled on like this forever!" He stomped down hard and heavily, and Ragna let out a choked cry. But he grabbed the foot with enough force to break it.

"I will... never forgive you..."

Gritting his teeth, Ragna pushed back on Terumi's foot with all his might. When the leather shoe finally lifted off his shoulder, he twisted his body and lunged as if to tackle Terumi.

"Tch, you bastard!" Terumi clicked his tongue, annoyed at being pushed back.

Ragna snatched his sword and swung it sideways to create distance. He immediately raised his right hand in front of him.

"I'll kill you!" His insides burned with heat. In response to that heat, his clenched right fist began to glow burning hot. "Restriction 666 released! Dimensional interference field deployed!"

In response to his words, his right arm buzzed as the compressed seithr within it stirred. The Azure Grimoire, contained within his arm, began to throb loudly, as if it were a separate living creature.

"The Azure Grimoire... the original and strongest grimoire? Well, it would be a shame if I didn't respond in kind!" Terumi laughed menacingly from a sword's length away. He fixed his hat and raised his right hand in front of him, mimicking Ragna's gesture. "Restriction 666 released! Dimensional interference field deployed!"

Ragna froze in disbelief at the words. They were the exact words Ragna had always used, the ones he had just spoken. Terumi repeated them exactly, a smirk on his face.

Then, they both spoke at the same time.

"Blazblue, activate!"

"Blazblue, activate!"

Their respective grimoires activated in response to their voices. A black, murky darkness ignited in Ragna's right arm, flickering like a burning flame. In the same way, Terumi's right arm was also shrouded in a dark, flickering void.

The Blazblue... the same grimoire. It wasn't a mistake or a misjudgment. But why?

"Why do you have one?"

As Ragna stood paralyzed in shock, close to despair, Terumi thrust out his arm, now cloaked in darkness, and proclaimed loudly.

"Die, you weakling! Eternal Coils of the Dragon Serpent!"

Behind Terumi, who laughed villainously, the darkness- the massive amount of seithr gathered by the Blue Grimoire -swelled up like a surging wave.

A torrent of black particle programs. In an instant, they formed several giant serpents and, following Terumi's swinging arm, attacked Ragna all at once.

The raining blows stole even Ragna's groans of pain. The overwhelmingly heavy attacks slammed Ragna to the ground, who couldn't even dodge or defend, and sent him flying backward, bouncing low and repeatedly on the floor.

When his body finally stopped, Ragna coughed up a large amount of blood instead of air. He had no idea what was broken or crushed. It felt as if his entire body had been smashed to pieces, and a crushing weight bore down on him.

As he laid on his back, Ragna heard the steady footsteps of someone approaching.

Just taking a breath felt like it would tear his body apart, but he couldn't just stay on the floor.

"Guh... ugh..."

Ragna gritted his teeth, forcing himself to move. He plunged his sword into the floor and tried to pull himself up. He barely managed to lift his upper body. Terumi stopped in front of him, creating the same distance as before. A condescending sneer was plastered on his face.

As he glared at that repulsive grin, Ragna's voice, now thick with blood, came out in a question.

"Why... do you... have an Azure Grimoire!?"

Terumi had indeed said "Blazblue." The attack he had just taken head-on felt almost exactly the same as the Azure Grimoire.

Terumi put both hands in his pockets and looked down at Ragna with a pitying gaze.

"I'll tell you something, you stupid, pitiful Ragna-chan. *I'm the one who created the Azure Grimoire!"*

How much easier would it have been to just deny it as a lie?

The truth, delivered with that sarcastic grin, sent a horrifying chill down Ragna's spine unlike anything he had ever felt before.

"What...?"

Ragna remained seated on the floor, holding onto his sword. He couldn't get over the shock, and he stared intently at Terumi, who was staring at him with a look of superiority.

How much easier would it have been to just deny it was a lie? But the existence of two "grimoires" was the most solid proof.

"I'll add to my earlier explanation. The truth is, refining a Prime Field Device into a Sword of the Godslayer isn't enough to kill the Master Unit. You also need the power of the Azure."

"The Azure?"

Ragna's brows furrowed. He had wondered about this several times before. What was the 'Azure' in the Azure Grimoire? It was ironic that he would find the answer in a place like this.

Looking back, Ragna knew almost nothing about the Azure Grimoire.

Terumi's golden eyes looked down at him, seeming to mock his ignorance.

"The Azure is the power of origin that exists deep within the Boundary... the power of creation and destruction. Only when it fuses with Murakumo does it become the Sword of the Godslayer, Kusanagi. But this part is a little tricky. If the fusion of the Azure and Murakumo fails, it goes out of control, and you get the Black Beast."

The monster that appeared on earth about a hundred years ago and drove humanity to the brink of ruin- the "Black Beast." The first time it appeared, there was an experiment being conducted using a Prime Field in a Cauldron.

Terumi spoke like he was telling a ghost story, but he suddenly dropped the pretense and his tone became more excited.

"That woman is a completely different story! Noel Vermillion- no, Prime Field No. 12 -is a Successor of the Azure who absorbed the 'power of the Eye' by touching the Boundary! I don't have to take a risk by giving her the Azure from the outside. She was a complete Prime Field Device who already had the Azure! Hahaha, isn't that amazing? It's hilarious! That useless doll from the past is incredibly useful as materials for Kusanagi!"

"Tch... Useful... materials... You're disgusting."

Terumi's cheerful tone annoyed Ragna, and he spat out the words. The anger that had momentarily vanished in his shock now reignited, as easily as striking a match.

Seeing the power return to Ragna's eyes, Terumi pulled back his lips into a deep, vertical grin.

"Now, listen up, Ragna-chan. This is the rest of your lesson. I was lucky that that puppet inherited the Azure, but before that, I obviously needed the Azure to fuse with Murakumo. I was able to extract a tiny bit of the Azure. By using special materials, I was able to turn the power of the Azure into a grimoire."

"Are you telling me that my Azure Grimoire and yours...?"

"Exactly! But don't get the wrong idea. What I have and what you have aren't the real Azure Grimoire. They're imitations of the 'True Azure Grimoire.' Fakes. Even though they're fakes, their performance seems to vary quite a bit depending on the user."

With that, Terumi lightly swung his arm. The black, flame-like shadow from earlier flickered and disappeared.

"Here's the bonus. My Blue Grimoire can nullify your Azure Grimoire. It's a superior existence to yours. So even if you get up and use your grimoire again, it's useless against me! Get it? You can't beat me, no matter what! HYAHAHAHAHAHA!"

Terumi's laughter, which resonated with his every injury, made Ragna grind his canine teeth into his lip in frustration.

Terumi was strong. Insanely strong. And on top of that, the Azure Grimoire, his most powerful trump card, was completely nullified. It was an inescapable trap.

He remembered the words of Trinity and Kokonoe. They both had warned him, with knowing expressions, not to fight Yuuki Terumi. That Ragna couldn't possibly win. This was what they had meant.

The reason his grimoire hadn't activated any barriers earlier must have been because it was being nullified by Terumi's. Thanks to that, Ragna couldn't even get up, let alone use the grimoire again as Terumi had suggested.

(*Damn it... get up! This isn't the time to be sitting around!*)

Ragna screamed at himself in his mind, unable to say it out loud. He put all his strength into the hand holding the sword hilt and struggled to pull his body up, but he couldn't move any more than he already had.

He was so seriously injured that he shouldn't have been able to get up. What kept Ragna moving was his tenacity, fighting spirit, and a small bit of help from the Azure Grimoire.

"Well, then..."

Ragna's face tightened at the sound of a shoe tapping against the floor. With each tap, the leather shoe came closer, as if to provoke him. He closed the distance just enough, then Terumi held up the hand he had used to slash at the air, pointing it at Ragna.

"Class is over. I don't have all day, so you can die now." In other words, this was the final blow.

If he took the same attack as before, he would die. Terumi wasn't even holding a knife in his hand, but the imminent threat of death made Ragna's body tense.

He had to dodge. But he couldn't move. He couldn't get up.

Space distorted, and a shadow swelled behind Terumi. A three-headed serpent raised its head and fixed its gaze on Ragna with its dark, hollow eyes.

(*You've gotta be kidding... I can't end it here! Noel is... still...*)

She'd still lost her sense of self. Whether she was Kusanagi or something else, she had been turned into a tool to destroy the world. How could he just leave her like that?

Ragna yelled at himself not to give up. He forced his legs, which couldn't support his weight, onto the ground. In his vision, Terumi's hand was slowly raised.

"Now, cry! Scream, little puppy! HYAHAHAHAHAHAHA!"

The shadow compressed the air, and it would crush its target without taking any shape. Lungs, bones, and even his skull- all would be devoured by its gluttonous fangs.

Just before it crushed him...

"Barrier, breached. Reboot, impossible..."

A girl had thrown herself in front of Ragna, into the path of the serpent.

5

In Ragna's wide-eyed view, a long, golden braid swayed wildly. Her sword-like feet scraped on the rooftop floor, and her frail body, too delicate to be a shield, bent forward as if enduring intense pain.

"What... are you... doing?"

Standing there was Lambda. She wore a black bodysuit with several sword-like parts attached and an imposing headgear. She had poured every bit of her energy into a defensive barrier to shield Ragna.

"What are you doing, you idiot?!" His outburst was a roar of anger. He yelled at her, but his voice was a little weak. Lambda turned to look at Ragna. The red light in the center of her headgear blinked twice.

"Confirming survival of target. Target's heart rate and breathing are both unstable. Blood volume, decreasing."

"Hey... stop it."

"Confirming reaction of Azure Grimoire. Currently repairing user's body... confirmed."

"My body is none of your business. Just get out of here." Ragna said, his voice trembling, feeling a sense of unease from Lambda's calm analysis of his condition. Just speaking made his chest clench and filled his mouth with the taste of blood. Not wanting to show her, Ragna swallowed hard.

Did she detect even that sound? Lambda stared at Ragna, then stood up, flipping her long braid and turning to face the front... where Terumi was.

"Commencing defense of target."

The words she spoke without hesitation were the very ones Ragna had feared.

"Lambda!"

This was no joke. Ragna tried to lunge forward to grab her arm and pull her away, but his body wouldn't move, despite his will. Pathetically, only his mouth was able to move.

"Why do you have to do something like that? I didn't ask you to. You were made to defeat Terumi, weren't you? Then..."

Then why did she prioritize protecting Ragna over attacking Terumi? The reason was so obvious that he couldn't bring himself to ask. If she hadn't shielded him, Terumi's attack would have struck Ragna directly, and he would have been dead.

"You said to."

"What?"

"If you want to save someone, save them. Ragna said that. So..." Lambda responded in a flat, dutiful voice, her back still turned.

Ragna remembered the words she spoke. It was when he'd entered the abandoned surveillance tower on the upper layer of Kagutsuchi and was treating the Tartar's wound.

"I wanted to save you." As she said that, Lambda held both of her hands forward. A mechanical sound, from her headgear or some other device, hummed, and eight blades unfolded like wings from her back.

"Hey... hey, hey, hey, hey, what the hell? You're ruining the mood. Read the room, you shitty doll! Don't get in my way!" Terumi, who had been looking utterly bored, dropped his shoulders and yelled as if he had reached his limit. He swung his hand down, pushing his long jacket aside and readying himself.

Out of Ragna's sight, the red light in Lambda's headgear blinked frantically, as if to warn him.

"Target attack confirmed. Commencing attack."

"Wait!"

Ignoring Ragna's plea, Lambda ran forward. Terumi met her attack, swinging his arm wide. Following its path, a black shadow scraped the air as if crawling from below. The shadow and Lambda's eight blades met in a barrage of strikes, each one sounding like tearing flesh.

"Hey... hey, you can hear me, can't you?"

Lambda's attacks didn't stop. She attacked Terumi nonstop from the air, from the front, from below, with the blades hidden all over her body.

But none of them managed to hurt Terumi. Her wide swings were seen through and dodged, and if she tried to attack from behind, she was blocked by the countless chains that grew from his feet.

Meanwhile, Terumi's attacks inflicted gruesome injuries on Lambda's body. A low kick mercilessly struck the girl's head, sending her flying, then he caught her body and slammed her to the ground.

Unable to intervene, Ragna could only clench his fists and yell with a strained, bloody voice.

"You're watching, aren't you? Stop her already, Kokonoe!"

The static of the communication line buzzed in Ragna's ear. It was even louder than the static he'd heard when he encountered Tager. Amidst the broken static, Kokonoe's voice answered, clearly panicked.

"I've been trying! But she's not accepting any of my commands! This is... impossible!"

"You made her, didn't you?! Why can't you stop her?!"

"Lambda is currently in a runaway state! She's not accepting a forced transfer. She's going out of control!"

"A runaway state?"

Confused, Ragna looked at Lambda, who was still fighting. *That* was a "runaway state"? To him, it looked like Lambda was acting on her own accord. Was doing what she wanted, ignoring Kokonoe's commands and Ragna's pleas, her version of "going out of control"?

A powerful wave of emotion surged inside Ragna. He looked down at his own useless body, cursing it.

(*Hurry... just hurry and heal, Azure Grimoire! Don't be so slow!*)

He just had to stand. Stand and run, and pull that stupid Prime Field girl back. Why couldn't he do such a simple thing right now?

"Ah, I see, so she's Kokonoe's toy. Fine, go ahead and watch from your high horse! I'll make it feel good as I destroy her. Just like I did to your mother! HYAHAHAHAHAHA!"

Terumi launched a powerful kick, sending Lambda's body tumbling toward Ragna's feet.

"Lambda, hang on!"

Ragna crawled to Lambda's side. Her body was covered in wounds. A deep crack ran through her headgear, and the sword-like parts on her arms were broken in half. Fluid leaked from her gashed body and soaked her black bodysuit.

"Terumi, you... you...!"

Terumi's face puffed up with frustration at Kokonoe's furious voice coming through the communication line.

"Hyahaha! Get angry! Make me stronger! And then... you two can get yourselves skewered together!"

Terumi spread his crossed arms wide, summoning Ouroboros. From behind him, a chain with a serpent's head and a chain with a blade, each in a black and green shadow, leaped out, their shapes larger and sharper.

The serpent's head aimed for Ragna, and the chain with the knife aimed for Lambda, both heading straight for their targets. Sensing them, the fallen Lambda moved quickly. She pushed Ragna away, stood up, and spread her arms wide.

Lambda's "runaway state" finally stopped when two chains pierced her body at once.

Terumi, who was at a distance, clicked his tongue, and pulled back the chain that had missed its target. As the serpent's head and the knife slid out, Lambda's body collapsed, no longer able to stand.

Ironically, Ragna was able to catch her. He lunged forward and held her in his arms. His body had finally recovered enough to do just that.

"Ra...gna..."

Touching the arm that supported her, Lambda said his name in a fragmented voice. Her half-broken headgear fell to the rooftop floor. The weak voice made Ragna's hands tighten around her.

"Shut up, you idiot, don't talk! Kokonoe, do something! Transfer her and fix her right now, you can do it, can't you?!" Ragna didn't know how advanced science was, but if it had created Lambda, it must have a way to save her.

But the answer to Ragna's desperate demand was a cruel one.

"It's impossible. The damage is far beyond repair. Her transfer and self-repair functions are broken, so I can't retrieve her."

"What are you talking about?! Isn't there anything you can do?!"

"That idiot poured all of her energy into the barrier to shield you. I can't even remotely repair her. ...She can't be saved."

It would have been easy to yell "You're lying!" Yelling "Try something, anything!" might have allowed him to vent even a tiny part of the anger boiling in his chest.

But Ragna couldn't say anything to Kokonoe. The cold fingers that touched his cheek prevented him from speaking.

"Ragna?" Lambda, now a broken doll collapsed in Ragna's arms, suddenly called his name in a sweet, innocent voice. Ragna knew that voice. He frantically looked down at the girl he was holding.

"Nu?!"

"Impossible! I deleted the memories of Nu-13 and Lambda-11!" She had confirmed the deletion again during a maintenance check just a few hours ago. But it was an anomaly that Lambda remembered Ragna and that Nu's consciousness was calling his name.

But Ragna didn't care about memories or data. He instinctively grabbed her awkwardly outstretched hand, and her crimson eyes, which had appeared from under her headgear, looked up at him and smiled happily.

"Ah... it's you, Ragna... we meet again."

"You... why..." The words he wanted to ask were stuck in his throat. Unable to put his emotions into words, Ragna was confused and frustrated. The thin fingers holding his wrist traced his cheek, then his lips.

Every time she confirmed the touch, the temperature, the shape, Nu's eyes sparkled happily, and she giggled innocently.

"Hehe, I'm so glad Ragna is here... Nu was all alone... for so long... In the Boundary... I was dreaming the whole time... I only dreamed about Ragna, you know?" Was she talking about the long, long dream she had until she woke up in the Cauldron beneath Kagutsuchi?

"I went on walks with Ragna, too. We walked together in an empty city... and there were surprising things and happy things... and sad things..." Or was she talking about the short dream she had just before coming here?

Nu spoke happily, as if she were holding a precious treasure.

If you just looked at her, she was just a slightly childish girl. If she had been born and lived as a human, without the duty of a Prime Field and without so many blades, she would have lived a different fate.

"Nu... I'm sorry." The apology spilled from Ragna's mouth.

He had killed this girl. Ragna hadn't delivered the final blow, but he had appeared before her with the intent to kill, and as a result, she had been left alone to disappear. It was the same as if Ragna had killed her.

It wasn't just what happened in the Cauldron beneath Kagutsuchi. Ragna was letting Nu die right now, too. Even though she was so close, he was letting her be sacrificed, unable to do anything at all.

"Why are you saying sorry, Ragna? You're so strange." Nu giggled again and tilted her head. She reached out her hand a little more, touched Ragna's cheek with her entire palm, and let out a breath, as if in a daze. "Nu is happy. Because I got to see Ragna again... And this time... we can be together forever..."

"Together? What do you mean by that?"

Nu had been so persistent in her desire to be "together" with Ragna the last time they met, as if it was her only wish.

Before she could answer, Nu's body began to glow with a faint golden light. The light turned into small particles that floated away from her, as if being sucked upward.

"Hey, Ragna... please, make Nu yours. Then we can be... together forever." Nu whispered in a sweet voice. As she spoke, her body was rapidly turning into light, and she was losing her form, starting from her hands and feet.

Not knowing what was happening, Ragna tried to push the particles of light back toward Nu. But when he touched them, the light was absorbed into Ragna and disappeared, not returning to the shape of the girl.

"I love you, Ragna."

With that, Nu closed her eyes. Her body also turned into light. Just before her body completely turned into light, she opened her eyes one last time and spoke to Ragna in a different voice.

"Ragna... the sandwich was delicious."

The voice Ragna heard at the end wasn't Nu's, but Lambda's.

"Lam..."

Before he could finish her name, the girl with the number 11 on her chest turned completely into golden light and vanished. There was nothing left of her inorganic parts, her frail shoulders, her long golden hair, or her crimson eyes. The only thing that remained was her broken headgear on the floor.

Ragna stared blankly at his empty arms. He didn't know what to say. He didn't know what to feel. He just knew, with a simple understanding, that two lives had disappeared.

"Are the tearful goodbyes over?"

He probably broke it with a chain. Ragna glared at Terumi, who was toying with half of the blade that had been attached to Lambda's arm, throwing it up and catching it again. Ragna put all his rage into that glare.

"Terumi!"

Ragna grabbed the hilt of his wide sword, which was still stuck in the floor, and pulled his body up. He felt something hot run from the wound on his shoulder, which hadn't healed yet, but he didn't care. He stood on both feet. The fact that he could move his body even this much was thanks to the time Lambda had given him.

"Azure Grimoire or Blue Grimoire... I don't care about any of that. I'm going to defeat you!"

And then he had to go to the basement. So that he wouldn't let this man take anything else from him.

"Heh, fine. I'll play with you! You'll be more fun than that last piece of junk, right? I won't let you die so easily, so get ready!" Terumi pushed the brim of his hat with his fingertips, adjusting the angle, and then provocatively beckoned to Ragna.

In response, Ragna pulled his sword from the floor with force and readied himself. From the side, Kokonoe's voice interrupted impatiently.

"Ragna the Bloodedge! Activate the Azure Grimoire and connect to the Idea Engine!"

He had thought the communication was cut when Lambda disappeared, but it seemed she was sending instructions through the remaining headgear.

"Idea Engine? What's that?" Ragna's brows furrowed at the unknown words.

"It's the system that was absorbed into you when you absorbed Lambda. Lambda had an imitation phenomenon weapon... no, no time for explanations. Just connect to it!"

"Connect? How?"

"Just do it!"

He was grateful that she gave up on the long explanation, but it was frustrating that she skipped the most important part. Ragna clicked his tongue in annoyance, transferring the sword to his left hand and raising his right.

"Tch... always screwing around... Restriction 666 released! Dimensional interference field deployed!"

A blue light was born in Ragna's right hand, and the shock, like the pulse of a living creature, spread through his body. A torrent of power flowed into him. He felt a slow, eroding sensation from his shoulder where the grimoire was connected. But he desperately endured it.

"The Azure Grimoire again? I told you it's useless. Are you an idiot?"

As he listened to Terumi's taunts, Ragna subconsciously spoke the words.

"Idea Engine, linked!" Immediately, he felt like a switch was flipped somewhere in his body, and an unfamiliar power flowed through him. It flowed into Ragna's right arm- the Azure Grimoire -as if it knew its role without even understanding.

It wasn't hot... more like warm. It felt like a new bone had been placed in his arm, like he was being supported by an invisible hand, and his arm was being remade into something else.

It was a change that could be called a true reconstruction. The Azure Grimoire, which was supposed to swallow Ragna whole, was instead changing its nature due to the power flowing from him.

This change was clearly understood by its creator, Terumi.

"What's this? Is it... the imitation phenomenon weapon... that doll from before?!"

Ragna had no idea what was going on, but Terumi seemed to have figured it out. And apparently it was something the man hadn't expected.

That's good. Ragna slightly raised the corner of his mouth and continued.

"Blazblue, activate!"

A blue crest glowed from his right arm. At the same time, Ragna kicked off the ground with his sword in hand.

Terumi braced himself and launched Ouroboros, now accompanied by a shadow. In an instant, Ragna slashed the chain and knife that were upon him, acting on pure instinct. He then used the momentum from his swing to slash at Terumi's chest.

"Don't underestimate me!"

The chain, pulled back instantly, blocked his first attack. But without stopping, Ragna swung his sword again, pouring all the power he could from his right arm into it.

"UOOOOOOOOOOOOOH!"

In Ragna's hand, his sword warped and became a handle, and darkness formed a blade on its tip. It looked exactly like a grim reaper's scythe.

In the small space between them, he slammed the blade of darkness down, slashing wildly. He felt the wet sensation of cutting flesh, not chains, a few times. He didn't stop, continuing to swing and slash.

Finally, he pulled his arm back and transformed it into a giant beast's claw, bringing it down as if to crush everything.

"This is the end!"

Overflowing darkness filled the area, and the surroundings shook with a vibration so strong it felt like the branch would collapse. Beneath the claw Ragna brought down, something soft and something hard were simultaneously crushed, and a web of deep cracks spread from the center across the entire area.

Fitting the heavy vibrations, a thunderous roar was heard, carried into the darkening western sky by the wind alongside the swirling sand and dust.

When the remnants of the ruptured darkness were also carried away and gone, all that remained was the devastated rooftop, so damaged it looked like it would collapse at any moment. Ragna stood there, his shoulders heaving with ragged breaths, and Terumi had collapsed, his body embedded in the cracked floor.

"Heh, heh... ouch... it hurts, it really hurts. You absorbed that useless doll and rewrote my Azure Grimoire into your own... Kukuku, what a funny thing you've done." Terumi laughed with a torn-looking mouth, pinned to the ground in a spread-eagle position and unable to move a single finger.

Ragna dragged his sword along the floor, taking a few steps toward Terumi. He was going to finish him with one more blow. The sword felt heavy. He raised it, stumbling slightly as its tip scraped along the rooftop.

Terumi, still on the ground, just moved his eyes and stared at him through his disheveled bangs.

"Kukuku, heh heh, this is great, Ragna-chan... this feels so good. Go on, finish me. It's the perfect chance, isn't it? You hate me, right? You want to kill me, right? Go on, unleash all that hatred on me! HYAHAHAHAHAHA!"

Terumi's laughter was high-pitched and strange. Ragna wondered if he had gone crazy, but he immediately discarded that ridiculous thought. If he was crazy, he had been from the start. His laughter was annoyingly ringing in Ragna's head.

"Shut up... Quit laughing." Ragna squeezed the hilt of his sword, his voice bitter and painful. "You don't have to rush me. I'll kill you right now!"

He hated him. He wanted to kill him. This was the man he had always wanted to kill. It didn't matter if he was defenseless or not. Pushing the unsatisfied feeling into the corner of his mind, Ragna inhaled, fueled by killing intent.

Just as he was about to bring his sword down...

"Excuse me, but... am I interrupting? Ragna the Bloodedge, the Grim Reaper." A voice Ragna didn't recognize spoke to him with a cold indifference, extinguishing his burning killing intent. It was right beside him, only a few steps away.

Ragna's blood ran cold, and he instinctively jumped away from the voice. His heart pounded in his chest as he raised the tip of his sword and turned around.

How long had he been there? Ragna was sure there was no one there just a moment before the voice spoke. But now there was a man. A masked man with slicked-back golden hair, a purple cloak, and a creepy, emotionless presence, like an inanimate object.

Chapter 5: Call name - Person to the End

1

The gentle descent felt like a deep, deep dive to the bottom of the sea.

The force that pulled her white-clad body into the depths was "hatred." The feelings of hatred that bound her hands and feet wouldn't let her surface, dragging her down to the dark seabed. The water was cold, suffocating, and cruel. She hated... everything about it.

(*I hate it... I hate it... I hate the world...*)

As she descended straight down, the girl cursed with an empty mind.

This world was terrible. Ugly and cruel.

A world created and nurtured by a god, yet a world that had become distorted.

People torment others, sadden others, and cause a chain of anger. Anger inflicts pain, pain leads to more pain, and they never stop hurting each other as they dance madly. They laugh maniacally and sing in sobs, knowing they only weave destruction.

What a shallow... and empty world. A world filled with suffering, sadness, and anger, a world that just repeats despair.

She hated this kind of world. She didn't want this kind of world. She didn't *need* this kind of world. This mistaken, distorted world made by an unwanted doll...

"Must... perish."

As her pink lips whispered softly, her white toes touched the cold seabed. Her white cape and long golden hair softly fluttered down her back.

She slowly raised her face, revealing a wide, cavernous room deep underground. But parts of it were broken, and other parts were crushed. It was a space that was warped and crumbling, yet still held its pitiful form. It was a dark, miserable, and dirty place, yet it still clung to its existence.

This was the 13th Hierarchical City of Kagutsuchi, underground, Sheol's Gate.

In the pale light of the emergency lamps, a single figure stood there. A white man who looked like a ghost. A man with a strong body clad in equipment with red eyes and his face covered by

a blank white mask. A man who carried a very long sword on his back and stood there with an extraordinary oppressive presence.

"I've been waiting for you. Prime Field Number 12." His low voice, heavy and strong, was directed at the girl.

He had been waiting here all this time. Waiting for everything to go as planned and for the Murakumo who had obtained the Azure... Kusanagi to descend here. To prevent the blade of calamity from reaching the Boundary and aiming its point at the god.

"The white... Susano'o." The girl in the white cape, Mu, stared at the man blocking her path with her blue eyes. "Recognized as the Sankishin Susano'o Unit. Possession of phenomenon weapon confirmed." The target's threat level was determined to be maximum level.

Mu crossed her arms in front of her chest, shrouded in light, and spun around as if to cast it off. With that, her white cape vanished, and her white bodysuit turned into a revealing protector.

"You miserable doll possessed by the void. You cannot enter the Boundary." The masked man spoke in a low, intimidating growl. As he reached for the sword on his back, the blade, as tall as the man himself, was unsheathed with an overwhelming presence.

The man aimed the tip of the sword at Mu and held it horizontally at the height of his face.

Mu stared at the tip and thought.

(*Hate...*)

She hated everything in her sight. Her thoughts trembled. This blade, too, was meant to harm her. It would only cause her more sadness.

So she had to destroy it. If everything hated and cursed her, she would hate and curse everything. And she would destroy everything. That was what this world needed right now.

The man, holding his sword, stared at Mu with his eyeless mask and spoke with his mouthless face.

"I am the void, I am the steel, I am the sword... I am the reaper and the slayer. I will purge the evils that seek the depths of the Boundary."

With each line, the man's spirit rose so intensely that it felt like it had mass, and his long, silver hair on his back fluttered like a tail.

"I am Hakumen... Here I come."

As he spoke, the white-masked oni took a deep step forward, pulling his fluttering silver hair with him. The attack he launched was heavy and powerful, and it rushed toward Mu, a shockwave of wind in its wake.

The sword's trajectory was simple but unparalleled in its precision. A direct hit would lead to utter destruction.

"Destroying target." Mu spoke coldly, stared at her target, and swung her thin arms, deploying the eight bladed wings on her back.

2

January 4, 2200 - 17:16

The sun in the western sky had already set, and only the afterglow burned in the darkening twilight.

On the very top of a high mountain, on the rooftop of the Kagutsuchi branch, a cold wind carried the early night air, howling and swirling.

Despite the strong winds, the masked man who had suddenly appeared in the area wasn't bothered in the slightest. He remained facing Ragna, who had jumped back in a hurry. He tilted his chin slightly and looked him up and down. The man's eyes couldn't be seen through the mask, and he was eerily emotionless in every other part of his body.

"Wh-who are you?!" Ragna asked roughly, keeping his distance and holding his sword ready. The masked man calmly observed Ragna's reaction, then slowly brought his lightly clasped hand to his chin.

"Hmm... you've absorbed the imitation phenomenon weapon... I see, quite interesting..." His voice had no human warmth or even coolness; it was purely filled with curiosity, as if he hadn't heard Ragna's question at all.

That kind of attitude reflexively annoyed Ragna. He let go of his suspicion toward the intruder and asked again, his voice filled with hostility.

"I asked who you are! Are you a friend of Terumi's, the guy lying there?"

Ragna was annoyed by the man's demeanor, which completely lacked any tension, but somehow created it for him. He deliberately jutted his chin toward Terumi, who was still embedded in the ground.

The masked man, with minimal movement, looked at the shallow crater on the rooftop. Then, he spoke to the fallen Terumi in a flat, unconcerned tone.

"You've played enough... Terumi."

"Heeheehee, it doesn't matter. I did my job properly. You don't get to complain." Terumi, still lying on his back, only raised his head and responded flippantly.

Ragna's hostility intensified at their exchange. One thing was clear: the masked man was on Terumi's side.

"Hey, you..."

If he was with Terumi, that was all the reason Ragna needed to point his blade at him. Ragna re-gripped his sword, ready to attack instead of waiting, and his voice turned menacing.

But the masked man didn't seem to notice or care about Ragna's hostility. He turned back to Ragna and began to speak in his usual flat tone.

"My name is Relius Clover."

"Huh?"

"I'm a member of the Novus Orbis Librarium and hold the rank of colonel. Your concept of a 'friend' is different from mine, but not enough that I feel the need to deny it."

It was only then that Ragna realized Relius was answering his questions. But it only confused him more. Who was this man? The organization and rank he mentioned didn't seem to describe him at all.

Relius tilted his head slightly as if to change his angle of observation and lightly raised his hand, which was covered in a white glove.

"Are those all your questions? Then you'll indulge my request."

Without waiting for a response, he moved his raised hand to the side, like a magician about to perform an elaborate trick.

"Ignis."

The space within Relius's arm flickered, and in that instant, a humanoid figure was transferred there.

It was a mechanical doll, taller than Relius but with a clearly feminine silhouette. It had a metallic body, a dress, unnaturally long arms, and sharp claws. The doll, colored in a striking red, brought back a memory for Ragna from just a few days ago.

It was very similar to "Deus Machina: Nirvana," the phenomenon weapon that Carl Clover had called his "sister." But it had a much more human appearance than Nirvana, which made him shiver.

"Hey, Relius, aren't you here to pick me up?! I'm in a pretty bad state here, you know? I'm dying!" Terumi protested, apparently surprised by the unexpected turn of events. But Relius just gave him a quick glance and immediately turned his attention back to Ragna.

"That was the plan, but... your matter can wait. This is of some interest to me."

"Seriously? That's awful! Ah, well, I guess you're just that kind of guy. Fine, fine, do what you want."

Terumi gave up on complaining, as if it were pointless, and reverted to his spy-like tone. He grumbled to himself while fumbling for his fallen hat and putting it back on. In contrast, Ragna glared menacingly at Relius and the red doll he had brought with him, lowering his stance, ready to charge.

"Fine by me. If you're going to get in my way..."

No matter who or what the opponent was, he was going to cut them down.

With strong steps, his battered feet pounded the rooftop. But just as he was about to rush at Relius, a gray gust of wind swept across his path.

"Whoa!"

"Hmm."

Between Ragna's surprised shout and Relius's slightly dissatisfied voice, the wind that had interrupted raised itself up. What stood there was a large wolf with dangerously sharp fangs.

Standing in front of Ragna, the wolf snarled menacingly at Relius, then transformed into a human. The old wolf, with a well-built, tight body that seemed impossible from his beast form, was dressed in an elegant butler suit and had his long white hair tied back.

"Valkenhayn?! What the hell are you doing here?!" Ragna scowled, roaring furiously at the unexpected intruder.

The one who had appeared was Valkenhayn, Rachel's wolfman butler. However, unlike the refined and composed demeanor Ragna was used to seeing at Rachel's castle, he was in a ferocious combat stance, his rending claws and tearing fangs fully exposed.

"It's vexing, but... I was looking for you, you whelp." Valkenhayn replied with a resentful indignation, though it was unclear if it was directed at Relius or Ragna.

Suddenly, from a blind spot near Valkenhayn's feet, something like a small red rubber ball bounced out in front of Ragna. It was a familiar face: Rachel's familiar, Gii, with a soft, round body, tiny bat wings, and tears streaming from his small eyes like a waterfall.

"Waaaahhh! Help me, help meeee, pleaseeee!"

Flapping his wings frantically, Gii restlessly circled Ragna like a bouncing ball. Ragna roughly grabbed the creature, which seemed like it might bounce away at any moment, and held it still.

"What do you mean, 'help me'? Hey, what happened to Rachel?"

"That's just it! Lady Rachel... Lady Rachel and Nago went... Aaaah!"

As Gii sobbed like a child, Valkenhayn bitterly supplemented his incomprehensible explanation.

"She was restrained. But I cannot break the seal." Valkenhayn's voice was a low, frustrated growl, as if he were trying to contain his frustration.

"I'll handle this. You go at once and save Madam Rachel!"

"No... that's a bad idea. I don't have time for that now, I have to get to the Cauldron underground quickly!"

He was worried about Rachel and not indifferent to Valkenhayn's frustration at being unable to help. But Ragna quickly shook his head, which had almost nodded in agreement, and stared sternly at the back of the man blocking his way.

He'd lost a lot of time fighting Terumi, but Noel should still be headed for the Cauldron. Given the time that had passed, she should've already arrived.

As Ragna grew impatient, Valkenhayn glanced back at him over his shoulder. But surprisingly, the words that came weren't an angry command to prioritize Rachel.

"You needn't worry about the Cauldron. There is a man there... far more capable of fighting than you. He will not let the Kusanagi into the Cauldron so easily."

"A capable man?"

He wanted him to just spit it all out, but he didn't even have time to ask about it now. Ragna interpreted this to mean the world wouldn't immediately end once Noel entered the Cauldron, and put his sword back on his hip.

Seeing this, Valkenhayn turned back to face Relius.

"I'm counting on you to save Madam Rachel..."

"You too! I'm leaving this to you!"

With that, Ragna looked at Relius one last time. The man in the mask and his red doll, Ignis, remained motionless, either having no intention of stopping Ragna or cautious that Valkenhayn might leap at him if he made a move.

After giving a warning, Ragna ran off, bypassing the confrontation between Valkenhayn and Relius. Gii clung to his arm and came with him.

"I'll guide you! We have to go down!"

"Got it! Don't get thrown off!"

Jumping over the cracked floor and passing through the door to the rooftop, he forced his battered body to move, racing back the way he came as fast as he could. Down the stairs, using the lift, and down more stairs.

As he ran a distance that was by no means short, Ragna thought to himself many times.

She saved me because she wanted to.

Lambda had told him those words, which were originally Ragna's own.

Why had he taken out a first aid kit to treat an insect he wouldn't have even looked at if Lambda hadn't been there in the surveillance tower?

(Because she looked like she wanted to help it.)

He hadn't considered what would happen to the bug or what Lambda would think as a result.

Then why did Lambda defy her orders and protect Ragna on the rooftop of the Kagutsuchi branch, even though she was supposed to follow Kokonoe?

(Because she wanted to save me.)

She surely hadn't considered what would happen to her as a result.

There were no difficult theories or logical reasons. When you feel a powerful urge to save someone or something, it might be more of an impulse.

(I... I want to save them.)

He wanted to save Rachel and Noel. It didn't matter who they were or what his stance should be anymore.

He would help because he wanted to. With Lambda's voice echoing in his mind, Ragna leaped down the final staircase in one go.

Valkenhayn and Relius both listened to Ragna's footsteps as they faded away. They were rough, hurried steps, likely due to his injuries. Only Terumi, who was bored with the whole situation and didn't care about the footsteps, had already started to doze off.

"Well, well... What an interruption. It was such a good opportunity, too..." Relius was the first to speak, sighing wearily.

The sound of Ragna's footsteps had already disappeared from Relius's ears, but Valkenhayn could still hear the sound of the lift the young man had taken descending.

"I never thought I would see you again in a place like this." Valkenhayn said, his voice bitter and his face twisting in disgust.

Though neither had wanted it, this was a reunion. Possibly a stroke of luck or even an encounter with a ghost from the past.

Valkenhayn and Relius were old acquaintances. They had known each other for decades, or even over a hundred years. Yet Relius hadn't changed much from the person Valkenhayn had known over a century ago, while Valkenhayn, who aged much slower than humans, had gone completely gray.

Relius glanced at Valkenhayn's aged appearance with a hint of disinterest, barely moving his head.

"Valkenhayn... I no longer need any of your data... but... yes, I suppose you could be used for Ignis's data collection." His bored tone suddenly brightened with a flicker of interest as a new thought struck him.

At the mention of Ignis, Valkenhayn's attention shifted to the tall doll standing beside Relius. Like Ragna, Valkenhayn also thought it resembled the phenomenon weapon, Nirvana.

At the same time, he felt a deep sense of unease from the doll. It was more like a scent than a feeling. If it were a pure machine, or just a phenomenon weapon from the Dark War a hundred years ago, it wouldn't bother him. But this scent, faint but certainly present, was unsettling.

Realizing its true nature, Valkenhayn's wrinkled face tightened even more, his expression grim.

"You... you put a human in that doll, didn't you?!" Valkenhayn had sensed the smell of a human. And not a jumble of many smells, but the scent of a single person.

"Ah. I suppose I should introduce you... This is Ignis," Relius said, his voice gently cutting off Valkenhayn's interrogation as he gestured to the red doll with his gloved hand. "She was my... wife."

Valkenhayn instinctively felt disgust rise within him, knowing how truly vile that statement was.

A faint, thin smile appeared on Relius's otherwise expressionless face. In response to her master's smile, Ignis raised a large arm lined with sharp claws and furiously charged at Valkenhayn.

3

Guided by the still-sobbing Gii, Ragna arrived at a small square just behind the Kagutsuchi branch.

The western sky, which had been bright when they were on the rooftop, had now been swallowed by the indigo of the night, making the area quite dim. Normally, this was when the square's streetlights would turn on, before it got completely dark. But not tonight. The square had been mercilessly destroyed, and of the four streetlights that were originally installed, only one was still lit.

"This way, this way! Hurry, hurry! Hurryyyy!"

"Alright, alright, I get it. Stop pulling! And stop wiping your face on my clothes!"

Gii, having finally stopped crying just a moment ago, pulled Ragna's arm to lead him further into the square, seemingly relieved they had made it.

After wiping his wet, sticky, unbelievably stretchy face on Ragna's sleeve again, Gii stopped pulling and came to a halt in an odd spot- not quite in the center of the square, but not on the edge, either.

"Is this it?" Ragna asked Gii, who was still muttering to himself, as if he were soothing a child.

Gii nodded his round body skillfully.

"Yes! This is it! Waaaah, Princessss..."

"Stop crying! I'll go ahead and save her!"

Ragna was amazed that Gii was so worried about Rachel he would cry, especially since he usually hid behind her while talking back to him. Despite the terrible treatment he got from her- being hit with an umbrella and having his face stretched- Gii seemed to genuinely care for his master.

As he thought this, Ragna gripped his sword with both hands and focused his mind. Honestly, following a magical presence was not his strong suit. Besides the Azure Grimoire, he couldn't even use a single Ars Magus, but he had to try. He drew some power from the Grimoire and began searching for Rachel's presence.

He found it immediately. Gii's navigation was impressive; he was right in front of it. Being careful not to lose the presence he had just found, Ragna raised his sword. Power from the Azure Grimoire coursed through his body, and the blade became shrouded in darkness, as if it were burning with black flames. He swung the sword straight down, vertically, toward an empty space.

"URAAAAGH!"

There was nothing there, yet he felt the sensation of a thick cloth being torn. But there was no sound at all.

What Ragna had cut was the seal on the space itself. The space in front of him tore open in the path of his sword, and a gaping hole appeared. The other side was pitch black- or rather, a complete void. It was an all-black space where he couldn't make out a ceiling or a floor. Within it, Rachel lay unconscious, her head resting on a purple magic circle.

"There she is! It's the Rabbit!"

"Princess, Princess!" As Ragna called out, Gii cried out desperately, sounding like he was about to cry any moment.

After several strikes, a crack suddenly ran across the entire magic circle.

"This ends now!"

He didn't want to be in this unknown space any longer. With a final thrust, he wished for it to end. A sound like thin glass shattering echoed around the perimeter, and the magic circle disappeared.

Ragna caught Rachel as she was thrown into the air, having lost her support, and quickly exited the black space. Her body, held in his arms, was smaller and lighter than he had expected. He carried her out into the night air and gently sat her down by the wall of the branch office.

"Hey, Rabbit, Rachel! Snap out of it!" Ragna supported her head with one hand and lightly tapped her pale cheeks with the other. The shock wasn't very strong, but Rachel's lowered eyes soon fluttered, and a faint breath escaped her lips.

"Oh? How unpleasant. What a nightmare. The face of an utterly pathetic man is right in front of me..."

"Oh, Princess, I'm scared!"

"Hey, do you guys want me to put you back to sleep?"

Following Rachel's remark, Nago spoke in a fawning, catlike voice, having smoothly transformed from an umbrella into a chair for Rachel.

Ragna's temples throbbed at their first words, but he couldn't help but smile. He had been so worried after seeing how panicked Valkenhayn and Gii were, but it seemed that both the master and her familiar were surprisingly well after being rescued.

Gii was just as relieved. The small, red familiar bounced his rubbery body into the air and hopped to the foot of Nago's couch.

"Princess! Nago! I'm so glad you're okay!"

"Honestly, you worried me. It seems you're both fine now."

It was an anticlimax. Ragna ran a hand through his now-dusty hair. Rachel narrowed her large red eyes playfully.

"Worried? You were worried about me? How strange. It's a bit unsettling."

"Shut up! Your butler and that rubber ball were making too much noise. And what's with that attitude after I saved you? Say 'thank you'!"

"I already did."

"When?!"

Ragna had never seen Rachel like this. She looked at his indignant face with her large eyes and answered.

"Always."

Her casual response left Ragna speechless. A strange, ticklish feeling came over him. He picked up his sword he had thrown to the side, put it back on his hip, and stood up. The sky was getting darker, closer to night. The wind smelled completely of the night. Soon, stars would scatter across the sky, which was murky with seithr.

"Anyway, I saved you. So don't get caught again."

"How rude. I'm not some dog or cat."

"Dog or cat? If you ask me, you're more like..."

He was about to say "a rabbit," but Ragna stopped himself. This wasn't the time for jokes. He had places to be.

"See ya. Go back to your castle and drink some tea."

Valkenhayn had said someone was at the Cauldron to stop Noel, but that wouldn't last forever. In the worst-case scenario, Noel could be destroyed as the Kusanagi.

As Ragna began walking with long strides, Rachel's voice called out quietly from behind him.

"You're going to the Cauldron, aren't you?" Her mocking tone was gone, replaced by a sad, strangely sincere whisper. Ragna stopped and turned around, pulled by a sudden feeling of melancholy.

"Huh? Yeah. You know I have to. I can't just leave things the way they are. I have to save Noel."

"It's useless."

"What?"

As Ragna turned back, the vampire girl faced away from him. Her back was perfectly straight as she stared into the distance. Her posture was like something out of a painting or a sculpture, and for a moment, he couldn't tell if the voice he had just heard was real.

"What did you just say?" Ragna asked, his voice full of barely suppressed anger.

Shaking her long blonde hair, Rachel looked him in the eyes and repeated the same words.

"I said, 'It's useless.' You can't save Noel. She is no longer Noel Vermillion."

Ragna felt a surge of heat rush to his head. He reached out and grabbed the armrest of the black couch, leaning over to look into Rachel's face as if to challenge her. Nago let out a catlike shriek, but he didn't care.

"You're saying the same thing as Terumi! 'Noel isn't Noel anymore,' so what?! What are you getting at?!"

"Being compared to that man is an unbearable insult."

Her words were calm, but her red eyes, looking up at him, were not. The crimson color, which she was trying to hide, trembled slightly. To prevent Ragna from seeing what was in the depths of her eyes, Rachel blinked and lowered her gaze.

"Noel has been refined and become the Kusanagi. She has changed into a different being. The ego of Noel no longer exists. She is Mu-12, a being born as the Kusanagi, and the individual known as Noel has been lost. Do you understand?" Rachel slowly raised her gaze again, urging him to comprehend.

Ragna didn't know what kind of face to make. His brow furrowed in confusion and frustration. If these words had come with her usual insults and sarcasm, he would've responded with a defiant "Don't mess with me!" But at a time like this, Rachel spoke to him in a gentle, instructive tone.

"Hey. Is there a way to turn her back? Isn't there anything?" Ragna gritted his teeth as if to endure something, the words coming out in a strained whisper.

Rachel deliberately shook her head.

"There is no way. If you want to stop Noel, you can only do one thing." Staring at Ragna's pained eyes, the pale girl raised her index finger. "You must destroy Mu-12."

Ragna felt his heart skip a beat. Destroy Mu... destroy the Prime Field. Had he ever felt this much agony while doing that task before?

"I'm sorry. There's nothing that can be done."

"Stop it! Don't tell me to give up!" Ragna rejected her words fiercely, as if throwing away the apology.

Rachel's whisper held a mix of pity and exasperation, and that pity angered Ragna. It wasn't about being made a fool of. It was the fact that a situation existed where he *had* to be pitied that was maddening.

"If you're apologizing... it's like there's really no possibility at all..."

"I understand how you feel. But Ragna, this is..."

"Shut up!" He shouted, his voice a harsh slap. "I'm not gonna know... unless I try!"

He knew there was no possibility. He understood just from her tone how true Rachel's words were. However, he couldn't just give up and say she was right. He hadn't done anything yet. He hadn't even rushed to Mu's- no, Noel's side.

"I'll take that as a warning." Ragna said, gritting his teeth. He lifted his head and turned his back to Rachel again. "I'm going to the Cauldron. I'm going to save Noel."

The words, spoken for the second time, weren't a statement of purpose but a declaration of resolve.

He had no idea what he would do. But right now, he didn't want to hear any more complicated talk about grasping the logical reality of the situation.

He had no idea what he would do. But right now, he didn't want to hear any more complicated talk about grasping the logical reality of the situation.

"I see." Rachel sighed, a sound similar to the night itself. She sat on the black cat-shaped couch like a doll, her face serene as the moon. "If you have decided, I cannot say whether your feelings are right or wrong."

Rachel Alucard, the vampire, was a bystander. While she would interfere and tease, she couldn't make decisions. That was the role of humans.

Ragna shrugged.

"You're awfully quiet today. It's creepy."

"Heehee. If you return safely, I'll make sure to torment you extra."

"Like hell you will!"

When she returned to her usual self, it was a relief in its own way. Ragna threw an insult back at her and finally walked away from the half-destroyed square.

Left behind, Rachel remained seated on Nago and looked up at the sky. It was still too early for the moon to rise. The sky was dark, and the world was illuminated by automatically lit streetlights.

There was no one else around here. The disappearance of the branch soldiers was quite convenient for Rachel at the moment.

"…I'll rest for a little while." Rachel leaned her cheek against Nago, completely entrusting her body to him. Nago transformed into a couch, holding his master's small body, and Gii hopped onto Rachel's feet.

While she was sealed, Rachel's magic had been suppressed to its limit. Even after being released, it wouldn't immediately return to normal, and she was still unable to even teleport. She had secretly worried about what she would do if Ragna asked her to teleport him to the Cauldron. Her pride wouldn't allow her to admit she had almost no magic and be pitied by that stupid man.

However, his stupidity seemed to have exceeded her expectations, as it hadn't even occurred to him to ask her to teleport him.

"…You've changed, Ragna," Rachel murmured softly as she leaned against Nago.

He had become softer, weaker, more hesitant. But that meant he was no longer stubborn. He was no longer putting on a tough front. He was seeing the world around him.

"The world is changing. People change and evolve too."

If gradually moving forward is what they call life or fate, then the world, which had been trapped in an endless loop, was truly moving forward. This was a desirable outcome for Rachel. As people were meant to be people, the world should be the world.

Since the world was changing, the fate of the Prime Field living within its reason might also change.

But... even as she thought this, a deeply unsettling and unpleasant premonition stirred in her chest and wouldn't stop.

4

The sound of clashing swords was incessant, to the point that it seemed it would go on forever. It was light, yet intensely heavy, dull, yet swift and sharp. The blades met, parried, and deflected with such speed, it was hard to believe they had time to breathe between strikes.

A white-masked swordsman, Hakumen of the Six Heroes, was wielding a long odachi taller than himself. His opponent was a girl using four blades as a weapon, freely controlling the eight swords spread across her back. She was Kusanagi, the god-slaying sword.

Mu leapt in, unleashing attacks from all directions. Hakumen parried each one with his odachi and powerful arms, then, in the briefest gap between attacks, twisted his body to deliver a gouging slash.

But Hakumen's attack was also blocked by Mu's eight swords, which were being wielded as weapons on her back. The swords protected the girl like a shield, meeting the odachi that was swung to cleave instead of cut. The two clashed and reached a stalemate.

It wasn't a difficult fight for either of them, but it was by no means an easy one either. It was like an endless board game, with both sides knowing it could never end but unable to find a way to finish it.

He arrived late, drawn by the sound of the clashing blades. He watched the battle unfold beyond the horizon and, with that thought, fired a blade of ice into the center of the stalemate. The sound of thin glass shattering echoed, and the ice shards scattered across the underground floor.

Separated by the blow, Mu and Hakumen simultaneously turned to face the intruder.

He had no intention of hiding. The man who had broken into the fight with his ice Ars Magus, Jin, held out an empty hand in front of him, keeping both Hakumen and Mu in his sight.

"Come... Yukianesa." He called out in a cold, clear voice.

The ground around Jin's feet froze rapidly, and a cross of ice rose from it like a gravestone. When Jin took hold of the cross, the ice burst into glittering shards, revealing a beautiful sword with a blue scabbard. This was Mucro Algesco: Yukianesa, the phenomenon weapon Jin wielded.

"From now on, I will be your opponent. Move aside, Hakumen of the Six Heroes," Jin declared unwaveringly, gripping the scabbard of his beloved sword at his side.

Facing him, Hakumen also held his own phenomenon weapon, Interfectum Malus: Ookami, and replied with a heavy tone.

"Jin Kisaragi... How presumptuous. What can a weak shadow like you do?"

But then, the air around Hakumen changed. He seemed to gasp faintly under his mask, as if he had discovered something, and released his low stance.

"You... I see. You have obtained the Power of Order."

Jin frowned at Hakumen's tone, which sounded as if he had understood everything. The time he had with this white-masked man was peculiar. This was the first time they had met. He hadn't even known of his existence or name. Yet, at a glance, he knew this man was Hakumen of the Six Heroes, that he was a being who had crossed the Boundary, and that his power was weakened and incomparable to his original strength.

It was a feeling similar to understanding his own existence. It was as if their consciousnesses were connected by an invisible thread, and he was sharing it with this unsettling masked man. Hakumen also followed the thread of consciousness and knew that Jin had obtained the Power of Order. And Jin knew that Hakumen knew.

"Ugh..."

It wasn't a pleasant feeling. Jin shook his head lightly, as if rejecting it. He shouldn't be so influenced by this man's presence.

Since Hakumen had dropped his stance, Jin readied himself to draw his sword from its scabbard at any moment. He was focused only on Mu, not Hakumen. His opponent wasn't this shadow of a past hero, but this "obstacle".

"The Power of Order is a force that maintains balance. If there is a distortion that must be corrected, it will be corrected. If there is an obstacle that must be removed, it will be removed. But that is for me, the one who possesses the Power of Order, to do. Not you."

"This is not an opponent you can handle. The Kusanagi is a sword that slays gods. She holds the power to bring an end to the world."

"All the more reason for this to be a battle for us who live in the present world. Phantoms from the past shouldn't intrude on the present!"

Jin's voice grew sharper, as if to cut through Hakumen's words, which sounded like a test. The stage belonged to those who were on it. It was not for those who had already left it, only to audaciously step back on it and trample it.

Jin no longer looked at Hakumen, as if to say that he was not a worthy presence here. At this, Hakumen let out a faint chuckle.

"You bark. Very well." He sheathed the odachi, Interfectum Malus: Ookami, on his back. He stepped back, conceding the ground to Jin and Mu. Then he kicked off the ground and leaped away somewhere. "I will bear witness to your foolishness." A low voice came from the high ceiling.

Jin glanced up, and as soon as he knew Hakumen was gone, Mu turned to face him again. Her blue eyes, now devoid of all emotion but dark hatred, stared at Jin. He met her vacant eyes and snorted in contempt.

"Noel Vermillion. I thought you were a pathetic existence, but you've truly become a pathetic sight."

Jin disliked Noel. Her very presence irritated him. There were countless reasons, but the most significant and inescapable one was her face. She had the exact same face and voice as his sister, Saya, and sometimes even made the same expressions. She was a being who would unconsciously dig up and scatter the memories of a person's past.

But he had never imagined that she was a Prime Field Device. Much less that she was about to bring an end to the world.

"Come, obstacle. I will turn you back into a lifeless doll."

"Target combat level recognized as SS. Maintaining maximum attack posture..." Mu muttered quietly toward Jin, who radiated a sharp, frozen spike of killing intent. Then she said: "Disappear."

She closed the distance in a single, smooth motion, her greatsword of a leg scraping the floor. When she was still too far for Yukianesa to reach her, she twisted her slender arm. The eight swords on her back, following the path she indicated, moved with the coordinated precision of a single blade, cutting toward Jin.

Her movements were fast and without hesitation. It was a killing strike, but it wasn't so fast that it was invisible. The sharp strike wasn't so powerful that it would blow him away. She slid in to cut at his feet, then her two arm blades alternated, aiming at Jin. They were much faster than her first strike, but he could see them. He could understand them.

What would his old self have done? He might have been able to see them, but he wouldn't have been able to handle them. He barely would've been able to dodge...

"Hah!"

With a short cry, Jin parried the thrusting arm and kicked at her exposed body. He then slammed Yukianesa, still in its scabbard, into her and used the recoil to transition into an iaijutsu stance.

His old self might not have had the time to go on the offensive. But he was now, because he was dealing with Mu with an astonishingly calm mind. He could return the same amount of power as her speed and weight.

(I see, so this is the Power of Order.)

As he parried and deflected Mu's attack, a sweeping strike with the blade on her back, Jin felt a sense of understanding and admiration. He wasn't being overwhelmed, but he wasn't overwhelming her, either.

"Lay waste."

Mu had created some distance, leaped through the air, and swung her blade from a high position. Jin parried with his drawn sword, stepped in, and turned it into an attack. The floating blades were immediately recalled to block his sword. Mu seized the opportunity and slid her leg toward Jin's feet.

"Guh!"

Jin's expression twisted slightly. A normal person would be fine with a sweeping kick, but Mu was different. Her feet were blades themselves. The strong sweep cut deeply into his leg, making Jin stumble, not from a loss of balance, but from the pain.

Sparks flew as Jin and Mu's swords clashed. One, two, three. On the fourth clash, Jin released an ice Ars Magus along with his blade.

"?!"

The moment his sword met the blade on Mu's arm, her body was instantly frozen in a block of ice. She couldn't move.

"Shatter!"

With a sharp command, Jin brought both his voice and his blade down on Mu. The diagonally swung sword shattered the ice and cut into Mu's body, which had been sealed beneath.

But...

"What?!"

A shallow, almost delicate, diagonal cut appeared on Mu's body. It was far too slight for a direct strike from the front. Was it due to her sturdy armor, or was it the inherent strength of the Prime Field? Whatever the reason, that moment of shock was his mistake.

"Sever."

"Damn it!"

A tear in space appeared in front of Jin, and a glowing sword thrust through it, piercing his chest and sending him flying backward.

Mu pursued him, closing the distance. How could Jin possibly defend against the powerful slash that came with her charge?

"Gah!"

A sound like a cough escaped Jin's lips, and his body was sent flying backward again. He hit the ground hard on his back, and the ice he had instinctively conjured as a shield shattered around him, sparkling.

Amidst the swirling shards of ice, Jin connected his fading consciousness and lifted his head. Mu stood in front of him with her eerie, expressionless face.

Pulling his arms and legs in, Jin staggered to his feet. His whole body was trembling from the pain and impact, but if he stayed down, he would just be a target. Hot liquid flowed from his shoulder and side, staining the floor red.

"Damn it..."

He stood ready, thrusting out a hand to recall Yukianesa, which had been knocked away by the blast. As he gripped the familiar scabbard, Jin scolded himself.

The Power of Order is governed by one's will. Jubei had certainly said that.

If one's will has a strong conviction, then a tremor that shakes it leads to weakness. To be shot down and defeated after exposing himself so foolishly was a complete disgrace.

(The Power of Order...)

If he showed weakness, his power would dull. If he was strong, it would sharpen. The will he must carry, the will he must wield, the will he must grip along with his blade... it was so simple and clear it almost surprised him.

"I will kill you. You are a threat that will destroy the world's balance." Jin glared at her, his gaze as sharp as a blade. He froze the annoying pool of blood at his feet and stomped it into a fine dust. He then used the ice to forcefully close his bleeding wounds.

Seeing Jin stand, Mu lowered herself and slid forward.

Watching her approach in the blink of an eye, Jin took a deep breath. He gathered his concentration. Judging from the past patterns, the first strike would be a wide slash from the eight swords on her back. He would aim for that moment.

(Remember...)

He followed the memories of the events that had disappeared. The sensation of cutting Terumi, his breathing in that moment.

Mu raised her eight swords at a distance still too far for Yukianesa to reach.

"Without a trace..."

He would match her breathing.

"Tear open." At Mu's command, the eight swords attacked as one. Jin quickly passed through the swords.

"Empty Sky Form: Winter’s Riposte!" He shouted as the words came to him, just as he had before, and with a deep step forward, he drew Yukianesa. He felt the satisfying sensation of the cut and emerged behind Mu.

"Aahhh!" Mu let out a scream.

Jin immediately readied himself and turned.

Mu was bent over, enduring the pain. Her stomach was briefly torn open, and red liquid spilled out. There was no damage to her bodysuit, which had taken the brunt of the attack, but the impact must have been considerable. Mu's expression, which had shown no emotion until now, was slightly contorted.

She lifted her dark blue eyes to look at Jin. Her gaze was filled with hatred as she met his eyes. She shook off her pain and charged.

"Ugh!"

She kicked at Jin, a slashing kick that came with her momentum. He managed to block it with Yukianesa at the last moment, but the force was more than he could withstand.

Jin was thrown backward. His injured leg gave out, and he fell to one knee. At that moment, a ball of light the size of his head rushed toward him.

He didn't have time to scream. Jin gasped and closed his eyes. He couldn't dodge it. He couldn't parry it.

Jin braced himself for a direct hit. But the ball of light, which was meant to detonate in his face, was suddenly caught and swallowed by a black jaw that appeared from beneath his feet.

5

Kneeling on the ground and propping himself up with Yukianesa, Jin knew the owner of the black maw that had just appeared and swallowed the light. No, he felt his presence.

A shiver ran down his spine. This sensation, this presence, and the sound of these approaching footsteps.

Jin put off standing up and turned around. The person who stood there was exactly who he thought it would be: a tall man with white hair, a red jacket, and a large broadsword in his hand.

"Brother!"

It was Ragna the Bloodedge.

"Looking good, Jin." Ragna stopped next to his kneeling brother, looked down at him, and curled his lip into a sarcastic smirk.

Though he hadn't seen the whole fight, a single glance was enough to tell him how bad of a state Jin was in. Ragna recalled that the last time he'd seen Jin, he'd been covered in wounds and unconscious. Of course, at that time, Ragna himself was the one who had wounded him and knocked him out.

"What's with Valkenhayn? You're the 'more capable guy than me' he was talking about?"

Ragna's eyes darted around, but he couldn't find anyone else who seemed to have been fighting Mu. His brow furrowed in confusion and frustration.

But at his brother's words, Jin also raised his eyebrows in confusion.

"Valkenhayn? Another one of the Six Heroes?" He couldn't help but mutter it, a hint of exasperation in his voice.

Ragna looked down at Jin and tilted his head. From Jin's reaction, it didn't seem like his brother knew Valkenhayn. So who was Valkenhayn talking about?

"Whatever. For now, just get out of the way. You're in the way." Thinking about what that wolf-man was thinking was pointless. Ragna grabbed the front of Jin's jacket, pulled him up, and shoved him further to the side.

Jin stumbled back obediently but didn't fall. He gripped Yukianesa and looked at Ragna aggressively.

"This is my duty, brother. I have to..." As the wielder of the Power of Order, he had to be the one to defeat her.

However, Ragna looked back at Jin's calm sense of duty with an emotion that was far from calm, and firmly shook his head.

"Sorry, but I'm not in the mood to fight with you right now. Just get out of the way." Ragna's voice was low and savage, far more ferocious than Jin's aggression.

The raw killing intent was so fierce it seemed as if he would tear Jin's throat out if he got any closer. Jin swallowed his words, realizing it was useless to try to stop him.

Ragna immediately ignored Jin and turned to face Mu, who was staring at the intruder. Mu had let go of her stomach, which had been struck by Jin, and seemed to be watching Ragna.

Ragna's expression became difficult for a moment as he looked at her form. Her slender arms were each equipped with a single, sharp, silver blade. Her legs had large, sword-like attachments that could easily cut through bone. Eight swords were attached to her back like wings, and she wore a bombastic headset with the number 12 etched into its center. He had thought the same thing when he saw her in the white cape on the roof, but this form was exactly that of a Prime Field, just like Nu and Lambda.

"Hey. I've come to stop you... Noel."

Ragna deliberately used her name. But Mu- Noel- showed no sign of recognizing that the name belonged to her, her blue eyes blinking mechanically.

"Target's combat level... immeasurable. Possession of the Azure Grimoire confirmed."

The words that came from Noel's lips were cold and inorganic, just like the other Prime Fields. However, her voice sounded especially ominous.

Ragna clenched his fists tightly. The more he saw her like this, the more it was shoved in his face that she was a Prime Field, changed because she had been refined. His feelings were strained.

"Tch, is that what you've become as the Kusanagi? Pathetic... Hey, Noel! You're not that kind of person! Wake up!"

Ragna's voice was rough and loud as his mismatched eyes glared at Noel's changed form. She was a Prime Field, refined into a phenomenon weapon, and fused with the Azure Grimoire to become the Kusanagi. He knew this. But despite all that, the girl in front of him with the number 12 headset could only be "Noel Vermillion."

However, as if to render Ragna's thoughts useless, Noel spread the eight swords on her back and coldly said, "Eliminating target."

And as she declared this, she quickly leapt in a straight line toward Ragna's head. Following her raised arm, the eight swords came down in a single blow. Ragna blocked it with his broadsword.

"Ugh...” He had been hit by Prime Field attacks many times, but this one was still heavy.

Noel landed right in front of him, then immediately leapt up and spun around backward. Her raised leg narrowly missed Ragna's nose. The equipment on her arms became sharp thrusts with a mere extension of her arms. She then swung her arms wide, and the eight swords followed, cutting at her target.

As he blocked all of her attacks with his sword, Ragna looked into Noel's blue eyes up close. They were a bright, beautiful color, yet they gave off a dark and murky impression, probably because of what was leaking out from within them.

As he parried the eight blades' sweeping attack by slamming his own sword into them, Ragna peered into her dark eyes. He felt like he was looking for the real Noel, staring deep into the furthest reaches of her pupils.

(Hate.)

Suddenly, Ragna thought he heard something. It wasn't a voice, but a feeling like a sound. Like a single teardrop finally giving in and falling, creating a ripple on a completely still surface of water. So quiet, but it reached his chest.

(Hate. Hate. Hate. Hate... the entire world.)

It was being transmitted. It was pouring into him. Was it from their locked eyes, or from their clashing swords? Or was it the Azure they both contained being drawn to each other?

As if listening to flickering vibrations through a thin barrier, Ragna could undoubtedly hear Noel's and Mu's minds. There was growing resentment. Deep lament, pitiful fear... and empty despair.

Hate, hate, hate. I don't need a world filled with such despair and sadness. This terrible world should be destroyed. It has to be destroyed. I have to destroy it. Before one more despair is born...

"...hate..." Noel's lips moved as they were locked in combat. Ragna couldn't make out what her whisper said, but he knew instantly. "I hate it."

"I... hate... everything... I hate everyone... I despise everyone..."

Noel's blade pushed back against Ragna with more force. The pressure was like Noel's deep despair swelling up.

Ragna gritted his teeth and endured. If he gave in to this pressure, he felt he would be completely engulfed by Noel's despair.

"I don't need... a world like this... I don't need it, I don't need it..."

I don't need a person like me.

Within the fragmented words, Ragna heard a fleeting sound and gasped. In Noel's mind, which was filled with countless, overwhelming despairs, the sound he had just heard felt like her true feelings.

"Noel... why do you deny yourself so much?" As the pressure on his sword grew, Ragna struggled to speak, raising his voice to avoid being crushed.

Noel's eyes seemed to waver as if on the verge of tears.

"I am..." The voice that came back was still the same cold, mechanical one. It wasn't Noel's usual timid, uncertain way of speaking. But the words she spoke were not a disappointment to Ragna. "I am a doll... a manufactured thing... This world is a fabrication. It's all fiction. I am... the same."

Noel continued to speak in broken phrases, her eyes filled only with hatred and her expression blank, as if she knew nothing but killing and destruction. But it was clearly an answer to Ragna's question.

"I am... not needed. I am unnecessary. I shouldn't exist. Because of me... the world is distorted... a world where dolls who shouldn't exist, exist... where dolls pretend to be human... because it's a world full of mistakes..."

Everything was going wrong. Everyone was suffering. People who were supposed to be happy weren't, and people who didn't have to get hurt were.

Instead of her tone, the force on her sword grew even stronger. And if that weren't enough, several small devices appeared around Ragna. They fixed themselves in space, clinging to him.

"I will erase the world... and I will disappear. No one is needed... dolls aren't needed..."

As Noel's spoke, the small devices exploded one after another.

"GUWAAAAH!" Ragna let out a roar. The explosions were so close they seemed to be touching him, and blood gushed from his thighs, knees, shoulders, and back. For a moment, he felt his consciousness being blown away, but he desperately held on. He knew he had to endure this merciless pain.

Noel's words, still spoken as she held her sword against his, were like an emotional outburst. It was like she didn't know how to vent her feelings and was lashing out in pure emotion. The explosions felt like a part of that.

"What's... wrong with being a doll?" Ragna's voice was a strained gasp, forcing the words through his gritted teeth. He re-gripped the sword he had almost dropped from the force of the blast. "So what if you were made? If a doll is sad, it cries, and if it eats, it tastes good. Then it's basically human, isn't it?"

The images of the two Prime Fields who had called him Ragna flashed in his mind. Prime Fields were constructs. Not human. They were detestable things that should be destroyed. That's what Ragna had always thought as he went around destroying them. He was thinking to himself, who was he to be saying this?

But the first person who made him think this way was Noel. If Noel was so vehemently denying that she was a doll, then Ragna had to tell her she was wrong. Because it was from Noel herself that he had felt this feeling.

Ragna directed his words forcefully at Noel in her Mu armor.

"I don't even know how I was born. Maybe I was made somewhere like you. But I'm going to stay a human, Ragna the Bloodedge, until the very end, no matter what! That's the only me I know. You're not some doll you don't even know. You're Noel Vermillion, the human you've always been!"

Rachel had said that Noel's ego had already disappeared. Maybe that was true. Since Rachel had said it, that was probably how it was supposed to be. But at the very least, he could talk to Mu. When Ragna asked her, she answered. Just as Nu and Lambda had their own personalities and egos, even if they were distorted, Mu also had an ego.

There was no guarantee that Noel's existence wasn't still there.

"URAAAAGH!"

With a yell, Ragna pushed their clashing swords away and moved in close to Noel. He grabbed her shoulder, pulled her close, and slammed his forehead hard against her headset.

"Ah!" The impact echoed in her head. Noel's body went limp for a moment, and she swayed. His head also hurting, Ragna dropped his sword and put both hands on Noel's shoulders, pleading.

"You have friends, don't you? You have a family who raised you, don't you?! You don't need the world? You don't need yourself? Don't say such selfish things! There are so many people who care about you!"

While Ragna was shouting, Noel regained her balance. Her blue eyes looked at Ragna, who was holding her shoulders, and without hesitation, she thrusted the blade on her arm into the shoulder of his red jacket.

But Ragna didn't let go. He held Noel even tighter, his fingers digging in, and said, "At least I... wouldn't be alive without you. I was saved because of you! I want you to be 'Noel'!"

As he said this, Ragna slammed his left hand against Noel's stomach. It was a part of her body not covered by her bodysuit, where her bare skin was exposed. He touched the skin, which had a human texture, not a machine's, not to punch her but to press his hand against her.

He pressed hard enough to make a dent in her flesh, and Ragna loudly declared, "Idea Engine, reverse connection!"

It was an impulse, an action that could only be explained by momentum and intuition. But the Idea Engine... Lambda... had changed Ragna's Azure Grimoire. So he hoped it would do the same for Noel.

Following Ragna's declaration, his left arm began to glow as it touched Noel.

A golden light. It was the same light he had seen when Lambda disappeared.

Something swirled inside Ragna. A flow of power that was different from the Azure Grimoire, yet also different from himself.

He remembered this feeling well. It was the same flowing sensation he had felt when the Idea Engine connected to the Azure Grimoire on the roof. The same feeling was now flowing from Ragna into Noel.

(Please... come back, Noel!) Ragna put more force into the hands holding Noel, as if he were praying.

"UWAAAAAAHHH!"

Light overflowed from the spot where Ragna was touching her. Noel arched her back and began to writhe in pain as if the light was consuming her. The light grew stronger and stronger. As it did, Noel's pained gasps grew louder, while Ragna felt the strength drain from his entire body.

(What is this...?)

Ragna couldn't stand. He didn't even know what was happening. The light kept overflowing, enveloped Noel's entire body, and then expanded all at once, filling Ragna's vision...

It burst like an explosion with no sound, swallowing Ragna's consciousness in an instant.

6

...He heard a voice. The voice of a sobbing girl.

(Crying again?)

She... his sister... cried often. She would cry about little things, like falling down or dropping something. Every time, Ragna would pat her head.

"It's okay." He'd comfort her by saying it would be alright now...

"Uhh... huh... I'm so sorry... mm, I'm... so-sorry..."

The crying grew clearer. Noticing this, Ragna finally realized he had been unconscious and was slowly regaining consciousness.

(I'm...)

He slowly lifted his arm. That's right. This wasn't a dream, and it wasn't the nostalgic church from his memories. This was deep underground, in the 13th Hierarchical City of Kagutsuchi, in front of the fallen Cauldron.

Ragna's body lay on the ground, powerless. He remembered the sudden loss of strength just before he blacked out. He had probably just collapsed from a complete loss of power. He was lying face down, and someone was holding his head in their lap, hugging him.

"I'm sorry... I... I'm sorry... *hiccup*, ohh..."

There was no need to wonder who it was. Ragna felt the familiar presence on his stomach and slowly, deeply, exhaled.

"You're... crying again."

His vision and consciousness were finally clear. Noel was sitting on the ground, holding Ragna's head in her lap and sobbing like a child. Her Mu equipment seemed to have been deactivated. There were no dangerous blades on the arms that held his head or on the legs beneath his cheek.

Did she hear Ragna's voice? The small hand that was touching his head flinched. Her fingertips, already trembling, trembled even more as she hesitantly ran them through Ragna's hair.

"You... you're alive..." Noel patted Ragna's head all over, as if confirming it. It tickled, but Ragna didn't have the strength to push her away.

"Yeah. Don't go killing me off." Instead, he replied with a small complaint. Suddenly, the arms holding his head tightened. Noel was hugging him tightly.

"Oh, thank... goodness... oh... ohhh..."

"Stop crying..." Ragna closed his eyes, thinking that he was the one who wanted to cry.

The voice he was hearing was Noel's. It wasn't the cold, mechanical voice she'd had as a Prime Field, but her own pitiable, weak, and insecure voice, which sounded like she was on the verge of tears- and was already crying. He never thought the day would come when he would find this annoying crying comforting.

Thank goodness, he almost let out his true feelings, but he held them back.

"But, but I... hiccup." Noel's sobbing voice suddenly hitched.

Ragna opened his eyes. He strained his neck, which throbbed with pain at the slightest movement, and looked at Noel. Her face had gone pale as she looked down at Ragna's left shoulder. Her tears stopped for a moment, then came in large, renewed drops. He noticed her eyes had returned to their familiar, gentle green.

"R-Ragna... your arm..."

"Huh? My arm?... Oh, right."

At her frightened voice, Ragna struggled to turn his head again and finally noticed. Ragna's left shoulder, where Noel was staring at with tears, was missing its arm.

Ragna gave a wry smile on Noel's lap. He tried to shrug his shoulders, but it didn't quite work.

"Well, it's fine, isn't it? I still have the other one. What's one or two arms at this point..."

"That's not the problem! 'You have the other one'... that's so... stupid..."

It was meant to be a simple joke, but he got a sincere protest in return.

Her words gave Ragna a sense of déjà vu. Something like this had happened before. Right here, in fact.

As he thought this, Noel, overwhelmed with emotion, began to sob, hugging his head tighter and tighter in her arms.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid!"

"Ouch, ouch, ouch... Hey, wait, you're going to crush me! I'm going to break!"

At Ragna's scream, Noel recoiled as if she'd been suddenly awakened. The moment she let go of him and his head fell back was the most painful, but Ragna didn't have the energy to complain about it and just sighed.

He sighed again in relief. He'd thought his skull was going to be crushed.

"It's fine. It's just an arm. It's a cheap price to pay for you."

His whole body was so injured that he was probably numb, so there was no pain in his left shoulder. But the feeling of a hole where his arm used to be was oddly familiar.

In his childhood, his right arm had been cut off with a single stroke. That was the night he lost everything. But now was different. This was just an arm, a result of him successfully protecting- and taking back -something he had wanted to protect. It was a cheap price to pay.

"Let me borrow your shoulder for a bit."

This strange atmosphere couldn't last forever, so Ragna reached out and grabbed Noel's shoulder. He was hesitant to touch a person with his right hand, but it was the only one he had left, so he had no choice. He dragged his battered body, which he didn't even want to check for new wounds, back to a standing position.

Another arm, not Noel's, reached out to help him. Ragna looked up. Jin had grabbed his right arm and helped him stand, lending him a shoulder. Jin must have dragged his own injured body all the way from where Ragna had pushed him.

When Ragna was standing, Jin looked between him and Noel with a troubled frown, then looked away as if he were annoyed. The uncomfortable atmosphere was contagious, and Ragna also averted his gaze, lost as to where to put himself in this strange, weightless moment.

What should he do now? Just as he was about to think about it...

Clap, clap, clap.

A faint sound of applause echoed through the area.

"Alright, everyone, thanks for all your hard work."

At that voice, Ragna, Noel, and Jin all tensed and instantly looked up.

On a stage of rubble that sealed the Cauldron, they saw... Hazama. But there was no lingering trace of the rooftop battle on him. His slender black suit had no dirt on it, and there wasn't a single drop of blood on his face. It was as if that battle at sunset had been a game with a hallucination.

Next to the stunned Ragna, Noel flinched in fear, and Jin readied himself, holding Yukianesa. Suddenly, Rachel and Hakumen teleported to a position that seemed to protect the three of them.

"Rabbit! And the masked bastard!"

For Ragna, this was an unexpected combination. As Ragna cried out in surprise, Rachel's voice was sharp as she asked Terumi.

"Yuuki Terumi... where have you been all this time?"

It was a strange question, at least to Ragna. Rachel should have known from Gii that Terumi was on the rooftop of the branch and that Valkenhayn was confronting Relius there. This question was about Terumi's whereabouts after that.

With a calm yet deeply sarcastic smile, Hazama, the intelligence officer in a black suit, lifted the corners of his mouth in a grin.

"Oh, I'm truly impressed by all your efforts. Thanks to your cooperation, I just successfully neutralized Takamagahara a little while ago."

"You neutralized Takamagahara?" Rachel's voice was uncharacteristically tense, revealing her shock. "That's absurd... you should be observed by Takamagahara to solidify your existence in this world. If you seal Takamagahara, then you will..."

Yuuki Terumi was once a being sealed in the Boundary. He was discovered and salvaged by the Takamagahara System to be used as a pawn to manage the world. The main reason they thought they could control him was this "observation". Terumi's existence could not be maintained without being observed.

Takamagahara was Terumi's observer. When they wanted to make him move, the Takamagahara System used his very existence as their hostage or reward.

The green-haired man, who was both Yuuki Terumi and Hazama of the Intelligence Department, held his stomach and laughed, his shoulders shaking.

"Hehehe... Oh, that's a bit misleading. I don't necessarily have to be observed by Takamagahara. I just need to be observed by an existence on par with or superior to Takamagahara. Do you understand?"

Rachel's brow furrowed further at his mocking tone. What Hazama was saying was right. It wasn't just Takamagahara that could observe someone. But observing another person required an immense amount of effort.

Yuuki Terumi was once sealed in the Boundary, and Rachel could hardly think of anyone who could observe a being as special as him and maintain his existence.

Unless...

Rachel searched her memories, and her eyes widened in disbelief.

"Don't tell me *she's* observing you!" Her voice trembled, filled with shock, anger, and a hint of fear.

Hazama's expression turned sinister.

"Correct~."

The voice that spoke was clearly different from the calm, sarcastic tone he had used moments ago. It was filled with obvious malice.

That expression and voice stirred Ragna's animosity. He picked up his sword with his one remaining hand and readied himself, asking, "Hey, Rachel. Who's 'she'?"

But Rachel shook her long hair, as if she hadn't heard Ragna's question. "But... Takamagahara should still have been watching your every move. If you did anything strange, they could immediately interrupt with phenomenon intervention. And yet..."

"Oh, that's it! I love it when you get that flustered look! It's super satisfying! You're always so high and mighty, and I hate it."

Rachel glared at Hazama, who was sneering and spewing out hate. She was tired of his provocative words. But she desperately wanted to know his next move.

Hazama loosened his tie, squatted on the edge of the rubble, and grinned as he looked down at Rachel, Ragna, Jin, Noel, and Hakumen. As he spoke, he made a small gap with his thumb and forefinger.

"You see, Takamagahara... they looked away for a little bit. The owner of the Azure Grimoire and the successor of the Azure Grimoire fighting. The climax of a special match! When you guys were at your most excited, they watched for just one second- no, a moment, a few nanoseconds. That was the gap I needed to enter the system."

Rachel clenched her teeth. This was why he had been so obediently following Takamagahara's repeated phenomenon interventions. He had been looking through all the events to find the most certain and longest moment for Takamagahara to look away.

It was a ridiculously elaborate task. Rachel felt goosebumps rise on her arms at the obsessive thought.

Hazama, on the other hand, was in a good mood. He stomped his foot hard on the edge of the rubble.

"And thanks to that effort... all events have converged here! Right here, right now!"

The world had repeatedly chosen among all possibilities, and this was the scenario it chose to move forward.

This very moment.

Suddenly, the air shifted. It was a presence that felt like night wrapping itself in another layer of darkness, full of a quiet uneasiness. Rachel was the first to realize its true nature and her lips tightened in alarm. In response, Hakumen readied himself, his hand on the Ookami on his back.

The air shifted once more, and Ragna, Jin, and Noel finally understood why. It was a person. Another figure had quietly approached from behind Hazama. It was shrouded in thick shadows, but as the figure stepped into the dim light of the white emergency lamps, they saw it was a girl. And this girl had a striking feature.

Ragna and Jin both gasped so sharply it felt like their throats would tear.

She was a girl whose face was still slightly childish, her looks more pure than beautiful. Her long hair was tied up high, and she wore a robe that seemed to be multi-layered kimonos. Her pale skin was devoid of life, and her eyes were large. But the expression in her eyes, which were originally made to be lovely, gave her a different impression, with an unwavering arrogance that looked down on those below her.

She had an extraordinary aura. And despite the completely different feeling, he could say with absolute certainty that this girl had the exact same face as Noel.

"That's... impossible..." Ragna muttered blankly.

Being similar to Noel meant she was also similar to his and Jin's sister, Saya, but this wasn't just "similar." This was Saya herself.

A stirring sensation told Ragna that the girl on the rubble with Hazama was undoubtedly his sister, Saya.

At the girl's arrival, Hazama stepped back with an exaggerated gesture, his head bowed reverently like a loyal subordinate.

"Oh my, Imperator. I apologize for you having to come to such a filthy place."

"It's fine. They are the audience for the banquet that is about to begin. I just wanted to see them once."

The scene looked exactly like a subordinate and an empress. Looking up at the girl who wore an inhuman dignity like a robe, Jin's eyes narrowed in disbelief.

"She's the Imperator?! Why is she the Imperator of the Novus Orbis Librarium?"

Jin didn't know the Imperator's face. Seeing Jin's shock, Noel also realized that she, a member of the Novus Orbis Librarium, had never seen the face of the person at the top, the Imperator. She hadn't even heard a rumor that she was a girl.

The girl called the Imperator gave a chilling look to Noel, who was looking up at her.

"...Trash. You still exist."

Her voice was low and small, and Noel couldn't hear what she said. But the coldness of her gaze through the air felt eerily strange to Noel's skin. She got a very bad feeling from that girl. Noel looked away as if to run away from her.

By then, the Imperator had already lost interest in Noel and looked away. She addressed the lowly people in front of her with a smooth, almost lyrical intonation.

"You worms who grovel on the ground... Takamagahara is already in my palm. All events that were to happen have been established, and the probabilistic events have come to an end. The eternal has met its end, and the time has come for the world to return to its rightful form. I shall now begin the 'Day of Reckoning.'"

"'Day of Reckoning'?" Ragna's face contorted as he repeated the unfamiliar term. The ominousness was clear.

Embracing that ominousness like a fragrance, the Imperator, the leader of the Novus Orbis Librarium who was standing on the rubble, smiled faintly.

"Observe it well. The beginning of a new era..."

With those words, she turned and left. Hazama followed, and the two of them vanished from the underground of Kagutsuchi.

They were transported by teleportation magic. He saw a shadowy silhouette with Hazama. It was probably the magic used by that shadow. But Ragna didn't have the luxury of being surprised by the appearance of a magic user whose master had already been destroyed. His head throbbed, and he couldn't form a coherent thought. The face of the Imperator was so strongly etched in his mind that it wouldn't leave.

(Is that Saya?)

No matter how many times he asked himself, he couldn't believe it was anyone else. The last time he saw Saya, she was much younger. It was only natural for her figure and presence to have changed, even if he remembered her face. The Imperator was not the same height or expression as the Saya in Ragna's memories.

However, he was sure it was Saya, and that was what was so unsettling.

Ragna was so overwhelmed by the sudden appearance of the Imperator and lost in the impression she made that he failed to notice something.

...That everything that had happened that day was, as the Imperator had said, just a prelude for the beginning of a new era.

Epilogue

That day, a truly pleasant warmth enveloped Kagutsuchi's surroundings. The sky was clear and refreshing, and the sun was gaining momentum as it rose higher and higher. There was only a gentle breeze, and the temperature was mild.

Normally, only a few people living in the upper layers of the Hierarchical City would be able to enjoy such pleasant weather. People on the lower layers were blocked from the sky and rarely looked up. Even if they did, they would only see a small patch of blue, thinly smudged with black by the seithr.

But even a smudged, clear sky like that felt good when viewed from the wide, open plains far from the Hierarchical City. That's what Ragna thought as he walked.

Today, Ragna had left Kagutsuchi. A long time had passed since that night... the night Noel went on a rampage as Mu. During that time, Ragna had been contacted by Kokonoe of Sector Seven and had his wounds treated. And from Kokonoe, he had received a gift: a new left arm.

Apparently, when he had brought back Noel's consciousness, he had unknowingly interfered with the Boundary. Noel's soul had fallen into the Boundary, and he had forcibly pulled it back using the Idea Engine. His lost left arm was, in a sense, the price he paid for it.

He had received a more complicated explanation filled with technical terms, but that was the gist of it, and all Ragna remembered.

"Now that I think about it, neither of my arms are mine anymore." As he walked through the seemingly endless plains, stepping on the overgrown grass, Ragna absentmindedly looked at his two arms.

The right one was the Azure Grimoire. The left one was the arm he received from Kokonoe. It was apparently created in the same regeneration tank used to repair Lambda. Remembering how Kokonoe had told him to take care of it, Ragna gave a wry smile.

(Looks like she has a sentimental side...)

From the sound of her voice through what he'd heard on Tager's communicator, he had thought she was a cold, tyrannical, and unpleasant person, so it was a surprising discovery.

...Though he had no intention of retracting his opinion that she was still unpleasant.

(Oh, well. Even if I say I'll take care of it, I'll still use it normally.)

It would be weird to live his life cautiously protecting it. Ragna confirmed that his new left arm felt normal and then used it to lift his small bag of belongings onto his shoulder. Just as he was about to check his direction, he heard a voice.

"Heeeeeeey! Heyyyy, Good Guy!"

A voice was approaching from a distance at an incredible speed. Ragna remembered that voice. Or rather, in this situation, there was only one person he could think of with that kind of voice.

"Heeeeeeey! Good Guy!"

"...I knew it."

He saw her immediately. A girl with large clothes that covered her body, triangular ears, and a long tail standing straight behind her. A crescent-shaped mouth smiled cheerfully within her large hood.

It was Taokaka.

Closing the distance at inhuman speed, she caught up to Ragna in the blink of an eye and leapt up, not even slightly out of breath.

"Good Guy! I heard you were going somewhere far away, meow. So Tao's coming with you too, meow!"

"Oh... you were serious about that?" Ragna grumbled, scratching his cheek in confusion.

While he was being treated at Kokonoe's request, Ragna had been staying at the Kaka Clan village. At that time, the village elder had said that if Ragna ever left Kagutsuchi and went somewhere far away, she wanted Taokaka to accompany him.

Taokaka had never left Kagutsuchi. But because of her unusual fate, it was about time for her to see the wider world. The Kaka Clan elder seemed to have chosen Ragna as her traveling companion for that reason. He had refused at first, but when he was begged to take her as far as he could, he couldn't say no. He owed the Kaka Clan a debt for helping him so many times. He couldn't refuse their request.

Even so, he wasn't going on a vacation after leaving Kagutsuchi. Yet, seeing Taokaka in a complete holiday mood made him anxious. He had left without telling her he was leaving today, but she had caught him much sooner than he expected.

"Super serious, meow. Tao wants to go with the Good Guy and eat yummy steamed meat buns from all over the world, meow!"

"I don't know if they have steamed meat buns, but... *sigh*... alright, fine." Since he was caught, there was no helping it. Ragna gave a wry smile, nodded, and started walking.

"Oh! Good Guy, Good Guy! There's a big ship flying, meow!"

He looked up when she said that, and sure enough, there was an Ars Magus ship flying in the sky. It wasn't particularly big, just a small one or maybe one size bigger. It probably didn't belong to the Novus Orbis Librarium. He vaguely thought that maybe Noel was on that ship.

He hadn't seen Noel since she flew off after hearing that her friend, who was severely injured, was being protected by Sector Seven. He had only heard that she was apparently going to be under Sector Seven's protection. He had also heard that Jubei had taken Jin. He didn't know where or why, but Ragna assumed it was for a good reason since it was his master.

"So, Good Guy."

"What? It's not a meat bun."

"Mm, that's a shame, meow... But that's not it, meow! Where are we going from here, meow?"

Ragna was surprised by the question. It was too ordinary and logical for Taokaka. He was a little confused, but he turned his face toward their destination and answered, "The Ikaruga Federation."

It was a defeated land that had once rebelled against the Novus Orbis Librarium in a civil war and was defeated after years of fighting. He had heard that Yuuki Terumi and the Imperator were there, along with something else...

"Come on, let's hurry. I want to cross that mountain before the sun sets."

"Okay, meow! I'll leave it to you, meow!"

For a solo traveler, she was a lively companion. As Taokaka immediately started running ahead, Ragna quickly followed her while glancing back once.

The 13th Hierarchical City of Kagutsuchi. He probably wouldn't visit it again. The largest Hierarchical City was now just a small shape in the distance obscured by the seithr.

Afterword

Thank you for picking up this book. My name is Mako Komao, and I am the author.

First, allow me to introduce this book and the Blazblue series. This is the fourth novelization in the series, following the main story of the 2D fighting game *Blazblue* by Arc System Works Co., Ltd. It's the second half of the *Continuum Shift* storyline.

This novel follows the events of the second game, *Continuum Shift* (CS), which came after the first game, *Calamity Trigger*. If you've enjoyed the novel and are interested, I highly recommend playing the games! You'll get to experience character stories that weren't fully explored in the novelizations.

The novelization series also includes the *Calamity Trigger* arc, as well as *Phase 0* and *Phase Shift 1-4*, which depict the events of the Dark War about a hundred years before the main story. Please check those out as well.

During the writing of this book, the latest game, *Chrono Phantasma*, was released on home consoles! I was fortunate enough to participate in the game's scenario writing. If you're a fan of the games, or even if you're new to the series, I hope this encourages you to dive into the world of Blazblue. Not only does it have a deep story mode, but I believe it's also a fighting game that anyone, from beginners to experts, can enjoy.

I'm currently practicing with *CP* myself!

What's more, *Blazblue* even has a TV anime! By the time you read this postscript, the broadcast might have already ended, but the passionate performances of the talented voice cast, the powerful music, and the vivid animation make it a level of entertainment that goes beyond a fighting game. If you have the chance, please check out the Blu-rays or other forms of it. It's super cool!

Now, I could talk about how fun *Blazblue* is and how everyone should play it all day, and it would fill up this entire postscript. So, let's get back to the postscript and not just the introduction.

Ahem... again, this is the second half of the *Blazblue Continuum Shift* novelization. I hope you've had a chance to read the main story. What did you think? Did you enjoy it? I always feel like I'm writing this, but I'm truly always worried about it.

Right now, I'm just a husk after finishing the main story, and I'm slowly trying to regain some semblance of a human form. My mental state is a wreck, so I'm writing this postscript with more anxiety than usual.

Well, first of all, congratulations on making it to the end! The *Blazblue Continuum Shift* novelization is now complete!

We covered *Continuum Shift* in two volumes, but it feels surreal to think that this is the end. It's an even more dazed feeling than when I finished the first volume. I looked it up on the Internet, and the first Blazblue novel I wrote, *Phase 0*, was released in August 2010. The home console version of the *Continuum Shift* game was released about a month before that, in July 2010.

It feels as though I've come full circle and caught up to the game that was released when I first started writing Ragna in a novel, and it makes me very emotional.

Wow... I've written so much. Thanks to that, I've become quite knowledgeable about Blazblue. Still, I haven't grasped everything as well as Mr. Mori has, so I'm always writing with a mountain of reference materials.

But even for me, who has written so many novels, the feeling of "I want to know this" and "what happens here?" still remains. I think that's the charm of Blazblue. I love how it unravels each of those mysteries, and you're met with surprises and epiphanies one after another.

I can only hope that this book contained even one surprise, discovery, or a moment of understanding for you.

And I hope that I can continue to help write about those surprises and discoveries. Yes, I'm thinking that with sparkling eyes. Right, Arc System Works? And Fujimi-san? (I say with a smile.)

Oh, right. After *Continuum Shift*, Ragna's story continues in the latest game, *CP*. How was it? I've written a few novels so far. Were there any scenes that were particularly memorable or that you especially liked?

Just like with *Calamity Trigger*, the *Continuum Shift* novelization includes a few scenes that weren't in the game. I believe there were many scenes that could only be expressed in a novel, and many more that were also in the games and anime but were portrayed differently here.

I hope that through the descriptions, actions, and dialogue, I was able to leave even a small mark of affection, an imprint, or a scar on your heart. Both seriously and unseriously, I can't help but dream of that.

It would be a pleasure if a gentle scene made you feel gentle, a sad scene made you feel sad, and a heinous scene made you clench your fist.

It's been a long journey with the Blazblue novelization series, and thanks to your continued support, I've had many precious and wonderful experiences. One of those was a book signing I did a while ago (in October 2013). I get nervous every time, but I'm getting used to it little by little. This time, I was able to write on paper as my true, uninhibited self. However, maybe

because I let my guard down, I made a few mistakes and misspelled some words. To those of you whose paper I messed up, I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry for staining your card...

But I was so happy to see your faces, hear your voices, and talk to you, even if it was just for a little while! I was very excited. Thank you so much!

And there were also people who sent me letters because of the Blazblue novelization. That made me so happy... The joy of receiving letters and messages is truly indescribable. I'd like to take this opportunity to thank you all from the bottom of my heart. Thank you so much! I cherish them all!

Well, well, well. Now for the usual part.

To everyone involved in the writing of this book and the *Calamity Trigger* and *Continuum Shift* novelizations, thank you so much for all your help. It's a lot of work to write about Blazblue, but thanks to you, it's incredibly fun!

In particular, my editor, Sugiyama-san, who drew the illustrations, and Mori-san, the producer and original creator. How I wish I could express my gratitude and apology to you all in a tangible way. My gratitude is overflowing. It's a feeling of being super overwhelmed and super grateful. No, I'm not kidding around, I'm being serious, I'm truly grateful!

Thank you so much for everything!

And to you, who have picked up this book. Thank you so much for reading it. I'm so happy that we could meet through this work called Blazblue. And I'm truly grateful that I was able to continue this series. We've made it all the way to the conclusion of *CS*. Thank you so much.

I hope to see you again soon through Blazblue! I want that even more than you do, I think! So I'm sure we'll meet again.

With that, I'd like to end this postscript. I wish you all a wonderful Blazblue life!

Mako Komao

こんにちは、アークシステムワークスの杉山です。
コンティニュアムシフト完結
おめでとうございますありがとうございます。

小説の挿絵を描くのは一度やってみたいと思っていたので
今回は4冊も担当させていただけてラッキーでした。
良い体験をさせていただきました。

編集部のみなさま、森P、そしてそして駒尾先生！
ありがとうございますお疲れ様でした！

これからも「ブレイブルー」をよろしくお願いします！

Hello, this is Sugiyama from Arc System Works.

Congratulations on the completion of Continuum Shift, and thank you very much.

I've always wanted to try my hand at illustrating a novel, so I feel lucky to have been in charge of four volumes this time.

It was a great experience.

To everyone in the editorial department, Mori-P, and of course, Komao-sensei!

Thank you so much for all your hard work!

I look forward to your continued support of "Blazblue!"

こんにちは。
アークの森です、 概ねしゃもじと呼ばれています・・・
まずこの本を読んで頂いた皆様、 本当にありがとうございます。
そして、 真子先生。 イラストの杉山さん。 そして通称ガッキー
本当に色々ありがとうございます。
でも、 これからもよろしくね！

関係ありませんが、 このデザインも見慣れると・・・

Hello. This is Mori from Arc. I'm mostly known as "Shamoji"...

First, to everyone who has read this book, thank you very much. Also, to Mako-sensei.

To Sugiyama-san, the illustrator. And to Gakki, as we call him. Thank you all so much for everything.

But please continue to bear with us!

It's unrelated, but once you get used to this design...

it's not lewd, is it!!

Get used to it already!!

Well then, see you somewhere again, Konoshi.